BY RIGHT OF SWORD

A. W. MARCHMONT.

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By Right of Sword

I raised my sword and struck him with the flat side of it across the face.
—Frontispiece, Page 42.

By Right of Sword

BY

ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT

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"Sir Jaffray's Wife," "Parson Thring's Secret,"
Etc., Etc.

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BY

ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT

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BY RIGHT OF SWORD.

CHAPTER I.

THE MEETING.

MOSCOW.

"MY DEAR RUPERT.

"Don't worry your head about me. I shall be all right. I did not see you before leaving because of the scene with your sister and Cargill, which they may perhaps tell you about. I have done with England: and as the auspices are all for war, I mean to have a shy in. I went to Vienna, thinking to offer myself to the Turks: but my sixteen years in Russia have made too much of a Russ of me to let me tolerate those lazy cruel beggars. So I turned this way. I'm going on to St Petersburg to-day, for I find all the people I knew here as a lad have gone north. I have made such a mess of things that I shall never set foot in England again. If Russia will have me, I shall volunteer, and I hope with all my soul that a Turkish bullet will find its billet in my body. It shan't be my fault if it doesn't. If I hadn't been afraid of being thought afraid, I'd have taken a shorter way half a score of

times. My life is an inexpressible burden, and I only wish to God someone would think it worth while to take it. I don't want to be hard on your sister, but whatever was left in my heart or life, she has emptied, and I only wish she'd ended it at the same time. You'll know I'm pretty bad when not even the thought of our old friendship gives me a moment's pleasure. Good-bye. Don't come out after me. You won't find me if you do.

Your friend,
HAMYLTON TREGETHNER."

The letter was wretchedly inconsequential. When I sat down to write I hadn't meant to tell Rupert Balestier that his sister's treatment had made such a mess of things for me; but my pen ran away with me as it always does, and I wasn't inclined to write the letter all over again. I hate letter writing. I was to leave Moscow, moreover, in an hour or two, and when I had had my things sent to the railway station and followed them, I dropped the letter into the box without altering a word.

It had made me thoughtful, however; and I stood on the platform looking moodily about me, wondering whether I should find the end I wished most speedily by joining the army or the Nihilists; and which course would bring me the most exciting and quickest death.

I had three or four hours to wait before my train left, and I walked up and down the platform trying to force myself to feel an interest in what was going on about me.

Presently I noticed that I was the object of the close vigilance of a small group of soldiers such as will generally be seen hanging about the big stations in Russia. They looked at me very intently;

I noticed them whisper one to another evidently about me; and as I passed they drew themselves up to attention and saluted me. I returned the salute, amused at their mistake, and entered one of the large waiting saloons.

It was empty save for one occupant, who was standing by the big stove looking out of a window near. This was a girl, and a glimpse I caught of her face shewed me she was pretty, while her attitude seemed to suggest grief.

As I entered and went to another part of the room, she started and glanced at me and then looked away. A few seconds later, however, she looked round furtively, and then to my abundant surprise, came across and said in a low, confidential tone:

"It is not enough, Alexis. I knew you in a minute. But you acted the stranger to perfection."

She was not only pretty, but very pretty, I thought, as she stood with her face raised toward mine, a light of some kind of emotion shining in her eyes where I saw traces of tears. But my recent experiences of Edith Balestier had toughened me a lot, and I was suspicious of this young woman.

"Pardon me, Madam, you have made a mistake."

Then she smiled, rather sadly; and her teeth shone salt white between her full curved lips.

"Your voice would betray you, even if your dear handsome eyes did not. Do you think the mere shaving of your beard and moustache can hide your eyes. Just look into mine and see if the shade is not exact?"

I did look into them: and very beautiful eyes hers were. Little shining blue heavens all radiant with the light of infinite capacity to feel. Fascinating eyes, very. But I had not lived the first sixteen

years of my life in Russia without getting to know that in that big land all is not snow that looks white; and that a very awkward intrigue may lurk beneath a very fair seeming surface.

"Madam, I am charmed, but I have not the honour of knowing you."

A passing cloud of irritation shewed and a little gesture of impatience, sufficient to remind me that the gloved hands were very small.

"Ah, why keep this up now? There is no need, and no time. Is not the train starting in less than an hour—and by the way, what madness is it that makes you loiter about here in this public way, out of uniform and as if there were no danger and you were merely taking a week's holiday, instead of flying for...."

"Madam," I broke in again. "I must repeat, I am a stranger. You must not tell me these things. My name is Hamylton Tregethner, an Englishman, and...."

"Yes, yes, I know you are: or at least I know you are going to call yourself English, though you haven't told me what your name is to be. But I know that you are my brother Alexis, going to leave me perhaps for ever, and that when I want to scold you for running this risk—for you know there are police, and soldiers, and spies in plenty to identify you—you...." here she made as if to throw herself into my arms. But suspecting some trick, I stepped back.

"Madam, I must ask you to be good enough not to play this comedy any farther." I spoke rather sternly.

"If your disguise were only as good as your acting, Alexis, not a soul in Russia would suspect you. Oh, I see what you mean," she cried, a look

"I know that you are my brother, Alexis."

—*Page 4.*

of intelligence breaking over her features. "I forgot. Of course, I am compromising your disguise by thus speaking to you. I am sorry. It was my love for you made me thoughtless, when I should have been thoughtful. I will go away." She turned on me such a look of genuine grief that it melted my scepticism.

"There is really some strange mistake," I said, speaking much more gently. "At first I thought you were intentionally mistaking me for someone else; for what object I knew not. But I see now the error was involuntary. I give you my honour, Madam, that you are under a complete mistake if you take me for any relative of your own. I am an Englishman, as I say, and I arrived in Moscow only last night, and am leaving for St Petersburg by the next express train. I am afraid, if you persist in your mistake, it may have unpleasant consequences for you. Hence my plain speech. But I am what I say."

As I finished, I raised my hat and stood that she might convince herself of her blunder.

She looked at me with the most careful scrutiny, even walking round to get a view of my figure. Then she came back and looked into my face again; and I could see that she was still unconvinced.

"It is impossible," she said, under her breath. "If I allow for the difference your beard and moustache would make, you are my brother."

"I am Hamylton Tregethner," I said, and I took out my pocket-book and shewed her my passport to Paris, Vienna, Moscow, "and travelling on the Continent."

"These things can be bought—or made," she said. Then she seemed to understand how she had committed herself with me, if I were really a

stranger, and I saw her look at me with fear, doubt, and speculation on her pretty expressive face.

She sighed and lifted her hands as if in half despair.

"Madam, you have my word as an Englishman that not a syllable of what you have said shall pass my lips." The bright glance of gratitude she threw me inspired me to add:—"If I can be of any help in this matter, you may command me absolutely."

She gave me a little stiff look, and I thought I had offended her: but the next moment a light of eagerness took its place.

"When are you leaving?" she asked with an indifference I could see was assumed.

"By the St Petersburg express at 6 o'clock."

"That is two hours after the Smolensk train." She paused to think and glanced at me once, as if weighing whether she dare ask me something. Then she said quickly:—"Will you give me a couple of hours of your company on this platform and in the station this afternoon?"

It was a strange sort of request and when I saw how anxiously she awaited my reply I could perceive she had a strong motive: and one that had certainly nothing to do with any desire for my company.

Then suddenly I guessed her motive. The cunning little woman! Her brother was obviously going to fly from Moscow. She saw that inasmuch as she herself had mistaken me for him, others would certainly do so; and thus, if she and I were together, the brother would get away unsuspected and would be flying from Moscow while he would be thought to be still walking about the station with his sister. I liked the idea, and the girl's pluck on behalf of her brother.

"I will give you not only two hours," I said, "but two days, or two weeks, if you like—if you will tell me candidly what your reason is."

She started at this and saw by my expression that I had guessed her very open secret.

"If you will walk with me outside, I will do that," she said. "I am a very poor diplomatist." With that we went out on to the platform and commenced a conversation that had momentous results for us all.

She told me quite frankly that she wished me to act as a cover for her brother's flight.

"No harm can come to you. You will only have to prove your identity—otherwise I should not have asked this," she said, apologetically. And then to excuse herself, she added, "And I should have told you, even if you had not asked me."

I believed in her sincerity now, and I told her so in a roundabout way. Then I said:—"I am in earnest in saying that I will stay on in Moscow for a day or two if you wish. I have nothing whatever to do, and if the affair should bring me in conflict with anyone, I should like it. I can't tell you all my reasons, as that would mean telling you a biggish slice of my life; but feel assured that if there's likely to be any adventure in it from which some men might shrink, it would rather attract me than otherwise. But if you care to tell me the reasons of your brother's flight, I will breathe no word of them to a soul, and I may be of help." I began to scent an adventure in it, and the perfume pleased me.

My words set her thinking deeply, and we took two or three turns up and down before she answered.

"No, you mustn't stop over to-day," she said, slowly. Then she added thoughtfully:—"I don't know what Alexis would say to my confiding in you; but I should

dearly like to." She turned her face to me and looked long and searchingly into my eyes. Then smiled slightly—a smile of confidence. "I feel I can trust you. I will risk it and tell you. My brother is flying because a man in his regiment"—here her eyes shone and her cheeks coloured to a deep red—"has fastened a quarrel on him. He has—has tried to—well, he has worried me and I don't like him"—the blush was of indignation now—"and because of this he has picked a quarrel with Alexis; and to-morrow—means to kill him in that form of barbarous assassination you men call duelling. He knows he is infinitely more skilful than poor Alexis, and that my dear brother is no match for him with either sword or pistol; and he will drag him out to-morrow, and either shoot or stab him."

The tears overflowed here, and made the eyes look more bright and beautiful than ever.

"Why didn't your brother refuse to fight?"

"How could he?" she asked despairingly. "He would have been a marked man—a coward. And this wretch would have triumphed over him. And he knows this, because he offered to let Alexis off, if I—if I—Oh, would that I were a man!" she cried, changing the note of indignant grief for anger.

"Do you mean he has made such an offer as this since the challenge passed?"

"Yes, my brother came and told me. But I could not do it. And now this has come."

I didn't think very highly of the brother, but he had evidently talked his sister round. What I thought of most was the chance of a real adventure which the thing promised.

The man must be a bully and a scoundrel, and it would serve him right to give him a lesson. If

this girl had not recognised me, perhaps he would not. I felt that I should like to try. There was no reason why I should not. I could easily spare a couple of days for the little drama, and go on to St Petersburg afterwards.

"You are very anxious for your brother's safety?" I asked.

"He is my only protector in the world. If he gets away now to Berlin or Paris, I shall follow and go to him."

"But is he likely to get away when he will be missed in a few hours. A single telegram from Moscow will close every frontier barrier in Russia upon him."

"We know that;" and she wrung her hands.

"If he could have two clear days he could reach the frontier and pass unquestioned," I said, significantly.

She was a quick-witted little thing and saw my point with all a woman's sharpness.

"Your life is not ours to give away. This man is noted for his great skill."

"Would everyone be likely to make the same mistake about me that you have made this afternoon?" I asked in reply.

She looked at me again. She was trembling a little in her earnestness.

"Now that I know, I can see differences—especially in your expression; but in all Moscow there is not a man or woman who would not take you for my brother."

"Then I decide for the two days here. And if it will make you more comfortable, I can assure you I am quite as able to take care of myself with either sword or pistol as this bully you speak of. But it is for you to decide."

There came a pause, at the end of which she

said, her face wearing a more frightened look:—

"No, it must not be. There are other reasons. My brother is mixed up with..."

"Excuse me, can you tell me which is the train for Smolensk?" asked a man who came up and interrupted us, speaking in a mixture of Russian, English and German.

The girl started violently, and I guessed the man was her brother. A glance at his eyes confirmed this. They were a weak rendering of the glorious blue eyes that had been inspiring me to all sorts of impulses for the last hour.

"That disguise is too palpable," I said, quietly. He had shaved and was wearing false hair that could deceive no one. In a few minutes the whole situation was explained to him by his quick sister.

"I've only consented to go in order that Olga here may not be robbed of her only protector," he said, thinking apparently to explain away his cowardice. "She has no one in the world to look after her but me, you know. If you'll help her in this matter. she will be very much obliged; and so shall I. You needn't go out to-morrow and fight Devinsky—that's the major's name: Loris Devinsky. My regiment's the Moscow Infantry Regiment, you know. If you'll go to my rooms and sham ill, no one will know you, and as soon as I'm over the frontier I'll wire Olga, and you can get away." He was cunning enough as well as a coward, evidently.

"Very well," said I. "But you'll get over no frontier if you wear a beard which everyone with eyes can see is false, and talk in a language that no one ever spoke on this earth. Pull off the beard: the little black moustache may stay. Speak English, or your own tongue, and play my part to the frontier; and here take my passport; but post

it back to your sister to be given to me as soon as you're safe over. And for Heaven's sake don't walk as if you were a thief looking out for arrest. No one suspects; so carry yourself as if no one had cause to."

It was a good thing for him I had seen his sister first. He would never have got me to personate him even for a couple of hours.

But we got him off all right, and his sister was so pleased that I could not help feeling pleased also. First in his assumed character he made such arrangements for my luggage as I wished, and then we hurried up to the train just before it started. As we reached the barrier where the papers had to be examined, he turned and bade his sister good-bye, and then said to me aloud in Russian, hiding his voice a little:—

"Well, good-bye, Alexis;" and he shook hands with me.

"Good-bye," I answered with a laugh: and he waved an adieu to us from the other side of the barrier.

As we turned away together, Olga was a little pale.

Three soldiers saluted me, and I acknowledged the salute gravely, glancing at them as I passed.

Then I noticed a couple of men who had been standing together and watching the girl and myself for some time, leave their places and follow us. I told my companion and presently I saw her turn and look at them, and then start and shiver.

"Do you know them?" I asked.

"Alas, yes. They are Nihilist spies, watching us."

"Ah, then there is a little more in this than I have understood so far," I said.

"You shall know everything," she replied as we left the station together.

CHAPTER II.

I AM A NIHILIST.

"I THINK if you don't mind we will go back to the station," said my companion, stopping after we had gone a little way without speaking. "It is very convenient for talking. Besides, you have to decide whether this thing shall be carried any farther."

"I have already decided," I replied, quietly. "I am going through with it, if it is at all possible. But I have thought of many difficulties."

"You must know all that I can tell you, please, before you decide, or I shall be very uncomfortable." She said this very firmly.

"Certainly you must tell me everything that will help me to know what manner of man I am now." I smiled as I said this to reassure her; but she was very earnest and a little pale.

She waited a while until there was no one near us, and then said in a low tone:—

"My brother is mixed up with the Nihilists in some way. I don't know how, quite: but I believe they suspect him of having played them false, and I think his life is threatened. Those two men you saw at the station were spies, sent either to stop him, or, if he got away, to follow him."

"But they didn't attempt to stop him."

"No, they mistook you for him, thinking they could see through the disguise of a clean shaven face. Had you entered the train, they would very likely have told you openly not to go, or have warned you of the consequences."

"And what would be the consequences?"

"Surely you know what it means for a Nihilist to disobey orders? It is death." She was white now and agitated. "I am so ashamed at not having told you before you took the first step."

"It would have made no difference in my decision," I replied promptly. I thought more of clearing her clouded face than of any possible consequences to me. "But tell me, are you also mixed up with them in any way?"

"I am putting my liberty and perhaps my life into your hands," she said, in the same very earnest tone and manner. "My brother has drawn me in with him to a certain extent. You know they like to have many women in the ranks."

"I am sorry for you. I have rarely known a Nihilist who was capable of getting much pleasure out of life." A cold touch of fear seemed to contract her features, as she glanced at me and shrank a little from me.

"You! What—how come you to know anything of this? You said you were—an Englishman?"

"I am an Englishman: but I lived the first sixteen years of my life in Russia: the last six of them in Moscow here; and I know much of Russian life. I have made only one visit to Russia since I left; and this time I arrived only last night, and intended to go on to St Petersburg as I told you to-day. It will save time in this matter if you can make up your mind to believe absolutely in my good faith."

I looked into her face as I said this, and I held out my hand. She laid hers in it, and we clasped hands in a strong firm grip as a token of mutual faith and friendship. I believed in the little soul, and meant to stand by her.

"I will trust you now," she said, simply, after a pause.

"As for what you have told me, it can make no difference to me," I declared. "If I go out and meet this fellow Devinsky to-morrow, and he beats me, it will be all the same to me whether I am a Nihilist or an Englishman. There is only one soul in all the world who will care; and I shall give you a letter to be posted to him—if things go wrong."

I stopped to give her an opportunity of promising to do this; but she remained silent, and walked with her head bent low. I felt rather a clumsy fool. She was such a sensitive little body, that the thought of my being killed, as the result of her having got me to help her brother away, naturally upset her. She couldn't know how gladly I should welcome the other man's sword-point between my ribs.

After a pause of considerable constraint she said:—

"There is no need whatever for you to go out and meet Major Devinsky. You can do as Alexis said; be ill in bed until the passport comes back, and then leave."

"Oh, I'm not one to play the coward in that way," said I, lightly, when a look of reproach from those most expressive eyes of hers made me curse myself for a clumsy fool for this reflection on her brother's want of pluck. "I mean this. If I take up a part in anything I must play it my own way; but there's more than that behind. I don't want to

look like bragging before you; but I have come out here to Russia to volunteer for the war which everyone says must come with Turkey. I've done it because—well, you may guess that a man has a pretty strong reason when he wants to volunteer to fight another country's battles. It's the sort of thing in which he can expect plenty of the kicks, while others get all the ha'pence. I've not been a success in England and I've had a stroke lately that's made me sick of things. I can't explain all this in detail: but the long and short of it is that if anything were to happen to me to-morrow morning, it would be the most welcome thing imaginable for me. Now, you'll understand what I mean when I tell you that nothing you can say as to the danger of the business can do anything but attract me. If I could only feel my blood tingling again in a rush of excitement, I'd give anything."

My companion listened carefully to this, and her tell-tale face was all sympathy when I finished. Obviously she was deeply interested.

"Have you no mother or sister?" she asked.

"No—fortunately for them."

"Have you never had anyone to lean on you and trust to you for guidance and protection? That helps a good man."

"No. But I've had those who've taken good care to break my trust in them—and everything else." This with a bitter little reminiscent sneer and a shrug of the shoulders. "Still, it has its advantages. Any new part I might wish to play could not be more barren than the old."

My companion shot a glance up in my face as I said this, but made no answer. It was I who broke the silence.

"Time is flying," I said, in a lighter tone: "and

I have much to learn if I am to be your brother for the next two or three days. I want to know where I live, where you live, all that you can tell me about my brother officers and my duties—everything. Indeed that is necessary to prevent my being at once discovered."

After some further expostulation she told me that she and her brother were orphans; that they had come about a year or so before to Moscow on her brother being transferred to this regiment; and that the brother had private quarters in the Square of St. Mark, while she lived with an aunt, their only relative, in a suite of rooms close to the Cathedral. They were of a very old family, neither rich nor poor, but having enough to live comfortably and mix in some amount of society.

I gathered, however, that Alexis had been the source of much trouble. He had embarrassed his money affairs; lived a fast life, become involved with the Nihilists; dragged in his sister; and had ended by compromising himself in many quarters. She told me the story, so much as she knew of it, very deftly, intending no doubt to screen her brother; but I could read enough between the lines to understand that his life had been anything but saintly. Moreover, I was very much mistaken if he were not as arrant a coward as ever crowed on a dunghill and ran away when the time came for fighting.

All this gave me plenty of food for thought—some of it disagreeable enough. It was no pleasant thing to take up the part of a coward and a scapegrace. Scapegrace I had been all my life in a way: but no man ever thought me a coward.

I take no credit to myself for not being a coward; and I am quite ready to believe that there are sound physiological reasons for it. Nature may have for-

gotten to give me those nerves by which men feel fear; but it is the case that never in my life have I experienced even a passing sensation of fear. I would just as soon die as go to sleep. I have seen men—much better men than I, and quite as truly brave—shudder at the idea of death and shrink with dread from the thought of pain. But at no time in my life have I cared for either; and I have come to regard this as due to Nature's considerate omissions in my creation. Certain other omissions of hers have not been so considerate.

This will explain, however, why the thought of the danger which troubled my new "sister" so much did not cause me even a passing uneasiness, especially at such a time. What I was anxious to do was to get hold of as much detail as possible of my new character; and I was sufficiently interested by it to wish to play it successfully.

To this end I questioned my companion very closely indeed about the names and appearance of the brother's friends and fellow officers, about the habits of military life, and in short about everything I deemed likely to help me not to stumble.

At the close of the examination I said:——

"At any rate we two must begin to rehearse. You must call me Alexis and must allow me to call you Olga; and we must do it always to avoid slips."

She saw the need but blushed a bit when I added:—"And now, Olga, we'll make our first practical experiment. We'll go together to my rooms and you must shew me what sailors call my bearings."

"Shall we walk—Alexis?" she asked, her eyes bright and her cheeks ruddy with pretty confusion.

"By all means—Olga," I answered, returning her

smile, and imitating her emphasis on the christian name. "Do you know that my sister's name has a very quaint sound in my ears, and comes very trippingly to a brother's tongue?"

"But you don't like it and you think it common," she returned.

"I?"

"Yes, you have often said so, Alexis. Surely you remember. Why, only this morning you said how silly you had always thought it," she replied, demurely.

"Oh, I see," I laughed. "Ah, I've changed that opinion. A good many other things have changed too, since this morning," I added drily; and we both laughed then, and, considering the circumstances, were in extremely good spirits.

"Alexis," she cried, with a sudden warning, as we turned a corner into the Square of St. Gregory. "Don't you see who is coming toward us? Major Devinsky and Lieutenants Trackso and Weisswich. The major will pass next you. What will you do?" She asked this in a quick hurried voice.

"Cut him as dead as a door nail," said I, instantly, drawing myself up. "And the other fellows too; are they friends of mine, by the way?"

"No, they are his toadies," she whispered.

Olga bent her face down and would not see them; but I squared my shoulders and held my head aloft, fixing my eyes steadily on the three men as they approached. At first they did not recognise me. Then I saw one of them start, and making a rapid motion of his hand across his chin, he whispered to his companion, both of whom started in their turn and laughed.

As we passed the major made an effusive bow to my "sister" which the other two copied, while

all three sneered with an air of insolent braggadocio and simultaneously put their hands to their chins as their eyes fell on me.

My blood seethed with anger at the insult. Nothing could have fired my eagerness more effectively to begin the drama of my new life. If I didn't punish each of those three for that insult, it should be because death stepped in to stop me.

"I am glad we met them," said I, smiling. "I shall know now which is my adversary to-morrow, and shan't pink the wrong man by mistake. But you look a bit scared, Olga."—I saw she was very pale.

"I am afraid of that man," she answered. "He is a man of good family and great wealth, and has a lot of influence in certain circles. He is an ugly enemy."

"Ugly, he certainly is," said I, lightly, speaking of his face.

"I mean dangerous," replied the girl seriously.

"I know you do, child," I answered, as naturally as if she were really my sister. "But we'll wait till we talk this over after to-morrow morning. I tell you what I'll promise you as a treat. You shall breakfast with me, or rather I'll breakfast with you to-morrow, and tell you at first hand all about the meeting. You have been a little too anxious about me."

"I am afraid that might occasion remark," she replied with the demure look I had noticed once or twice before. You know that you have not always been an attentive brother, Alexis: and it is not good acting to overdo the part:" and she threw me a little smile and a glance.

I laughed and answered:—"That may be: but I've changed since the morning, as I told you before."

"Very well, then. You remember of course that aunt never gets up early enough to have breakfast with me—but you shall come if"—and here the light died right out of her face and her underlip trembled so that she had to bite it to keep it steady—"if all goes well, as I pray it may."

"You are a good sister, and need have no fear. I am not made of the stuff to go down before that bully's sword. So get ready my favourite dish—whatever that may be—and I'll promise to do justice to it."

"Here are your rooms," she said, a moment later, as she stopped before a large wide house. "They are on the ground floor with those windows. But before we go in, remember your manservant's name is Vosk, and he is a very sharp fellow. And please let me give you a word of warning. Alexis has not only not been attentive to me, but his manner has often been very brusque and—oh, if you had had sisters you would know how brothers behave. They don't mind turning their backs on one; they contradict, and interrupt and laugh at one; treat one as a convenience, and are rude. They don't in the least mind hiding their affection under the garb of indifference and contempt, and all that."

"Am I to treat you with contempt, then?" I asked with a grin.

"I think you should be a little more brusque," she replied, laughing and blushing. She was really a very jolly little sister.

"I shall get into it all in a day or two, perhaps."

"You had better try. Vosk is very sharp indeed."

"All right, I'll find means somehow to dull his wits."

We went in and I then tried to put a little more bluntness into my manner and to play the brother.

The man was in his room when I entered and started when he saw the change in my appearance. I caught his vigilant eye glance sharply at the pattern and cut of my clothes.

"Does you face hurt you now, Alexis?" asked Olga.

I understood her and answered in a somewhat surly tone, putting my hand to my left cheek. "No, not so much now; but it was an infernally silly joke to play. It's cost me my beard and a suit of clothes. A good thing it wasn't a uniform. Put out something for me to wear, Vosk," I said sharply to the man.

He looked at me again very keenly, but went at once to do what I ordered. Olga and I went into the chief sitting room—there were two leading one out of the other—and sat down. The man's manner had reminded me of several things. Very soon I made an excuse and sent him out.

"You must tell me all about the clothes I have to wear at different functions," I said. "Vosk saw that these were not out of my wardrobe proper. and while he's out, I'll hurry and change them, and we'll see how the uniforms fit me. A mistake may spoil everything at the last moment."

I ran into the bedroom and slipped into the undress uniform the man had laid ready. To my supreme satisfaction I found that they fitted me fairly well; and though they required some touches here and there, they would pass muster as my own. I tried on also some of the other uniforms I saw in the room; and wearing one of them, I went back to my "sister."

She cried out in her astonishment:—"My brother Alexis to the life."

"Your brother Alexis to the death," I answered so earnestly that she coloured as I took her hand and kissed it. Then in a lighter tone I added, "Uniforms make all men of anything like the same figure look alike. It's fortunate that your brother's an army man." Then we chatted for some minutes until I thought it prudent to change back again into the undress uniform that Vosk had put out.

Then I took a lesson in uniforms and questioned Olga until she had told me all that she herself knew about them.

CHAPTER III.

MY SECONDS.

I WALKED with my sister to her home, and then returned to my rooms and sat down to think out seriously and in detail the extraordinary position into which I had fallen.

The more I considered it the more I liked it, and I am bound to add the more dangerous it seemed. Obviously it was one thing to be mistaken for a man and to pass for him for a few minutes or hours: but it was quite another to take up his life where he had dropped it and play the part day by day and week after week. There must be a thousand threads of the existence of which no one but himself could know, yet each would have to be laid correctly in continuation of the due pattern of his life; or discovery would follow.

Here lay my difficulty, and for a time I did not see a way round it or through it or under it. So far as I could judge by all that my sister had told me, the resemblance between the real Alexis and myself was strictly limited to physical qualities. A freak of nature had made us counterparts of one another in size, look, complexion, voice, and certain gestures. But it stopped there. My other self was a subtle, cunning, intriguing, traitorous

conspirator, and very much of a coward: while I—well, I was not that.

I come of a very old Cornish family with many of the Celtic characteristics most strongly developed. I believe that I have a certain amount of mother wit or shrewdness, but no process that was ever known or tried with me was sufficient to drive into me even sufficient learning to enable me to scrape through a career. I was the despair first of the Russian schoolmasters for over ten years, and next of all the English tutors who took me in hand during the next ten. I went to a large English school, and was expelled, after a hundred scrapes, because I learnt nothing. I tried to cram for Oxford, but never could get through Smalls; and the good old Master, who loved a strong man, almost cried when, after two years of ploughs, he had to send me down, when I was the best oar in the eight, the smartest field and hardest hitter in the eleven, the fastest mile and half-mile in the Varsity, and one of the three strongest men in all Oxford.

But I had to go, and I went to an army crammer to try and be stuffed for the service. I never had a chance with the books; but I carried all before me in every possible form of sport. It was there I picked up my fencing and revolver shooting, It became a sort of passion with me. I could use the revolver like a trickster and shoot to a hair's breadth; while with either broadsword or rapier I could beat the fencing master all over the school. However, I was beaten by the examiners and my couple of years' work succeeded only in giving my muscles the hardness of steel and flexibility of whipcord. I am not a big man, nearly two inches under 6ft, but at that time I had never met anyone who could beat me in any trial where strength, endurance, or agility was

needed. But these would not satisfy the examiners, so I gave up all thought of getting into the army that way.

I tried the ranks, therefore, and joined a regiment in which a couple of brainless family men had enlisted, as a step toward a commission. But I was only in for six months: and my surprise is that I stopped so long. There was a beast of a sergeant—a strong fellow in his way who had been cock of the dunghill until I came—and after I'd thrashed him first with the single-sticks, and then with the gloves, and in a wrestling bout had given him a taste of our Cornish methods, he marked me out for special petty illtreatment. It came to a climax one day when a couple of dozen of us were sent off on a train journey. I left on the platform some bit of the gear. He noticed it and bringing it to the carriage window, flung it in at me and, with a sneer and a big coarse oath, cried:—"D'ye think I'm here to wet-nurse you, you damnation great baby?" And he waited a moment with the sneer still on his face: and he didn't wait in vain, either. Forgetting all about discipline and thinking only of his insult, I flung out my left and hit him fair on the mouth, sending him down like a ninepin. Then I picked up my things and went straight away to report myself to the officer in charge of us. There was a big row, with the result that the sergeant was reduced to the ranks, and I was allowed to buy myself out, being given plainly to understand that if I stayed in, my chance of a commission was as good as lost. This closed my army career.

For a few years I was at a loose end altogether—a man of action without a sphere. Then the natural result followed. I fell madly in love with my best friend's sister, Edith Balestier. I cursed my folly

in having wasted my life, and filled the air with vows that I would set to work to increase my income of £250 a year to an amount such as would let me give her a home worthy of her. She loved me. I know that. But her mother didn't; and in the end, the mother won. Edith tossed me over ruthlessly, while I was away for a couple of months; and all in a hurry she married another man for his title and money.

It was only the old tale. I knew that well enough; but it seemed to break my last hope. Everything I'd ever really wanted, I'd always failed to get. I was like a lunatic; and vowed I'd kill myself after I'd punished the woman who'd done worse than kill me.

I thought out a scheme and played it shrewdly enough. I shut the resolve out of sight, and laughed and jibed as though I felt no wound. And I waited. The chance came surely enough. I went down to a dance at a place a bit out of town and took my revolver with me. After a waltz I led my Lady Cargill out into the shrubbery and when she least suspected what I was about, whipped out the weapon and told her what I was going to do. She knew me well enough to feel I was in deadly earnest; but she made no scene, such as another woman might. Her white beauty held my hand an instant, and in that time her husband, Sir Philip, came up. Then I had a flash of genius. I knew he was as jealous as a man could be and as he had known nothing of my relations with Edith, like many another self-sufficient idiot, he imagined she had loved him and no one else. I opened his eyes that night. Keeping him in control with the pistol, I made him hear the whole passionful story of her love for me from her own lips; and I shall never forget how the white

of his craven fear changed to the dull grey of a sickened heart as he heard. At a stroke it killed my desire to kill. I had had a revenge a thousand times more powerful. I had made the wife see the husband's craven poltroonery, and the husband the wife's heart infidelity; and I let them live for their mutual distrust and punishment.

A month later I stood on the Moscow platform, my back turned on England for ever, my face turned war-wards, and my heart ready for any devilment that might offer, when my fate was tossed topsy-turvy into a cauldron of welcome dangers, promising death and certainly calculated to give me that distraction from my own troubles which I desired so keenly.

I was thus ready enough to take up my new character in earnest and play it to the end. If I were discovered, it could not mean more than death; while there were possibilities in it which might have very different results. War with Turkey was a certainty, and at such a time I should be able to find my sphere, and might be able to carve for myself a position.

It was clear that Alexis had so far been known as a very different man from the kind that produces good soldiers: but men sometimes reform suddenly, and the new Alexis would be cast in a quite different mould. The difficulty was to invent a pretext for the sudden change; and in regard to this a good idea occurred to me.

I resolved to say that I had had an ugly accident and a great fright, and to connect this with the shaving of my beard and moustache. To pretend that the mishap had effected as complete a change in my nature as in my appearance: as if my brain had been in some way affected. I mapped out a very

boldly defined course of eccentric conduct which would be not altogether inconsistent with some such mental disturbance. I would be moody, silent, reserved, and yet subject to gusts and fits of uncontrollable passion and anger: desperate in all matters touching courage, and contemptuously intolerant of any kind of interference. I knew that my skill with the sword and pistol would soon win me respect and a reputation, while any mistakes I made would be set down to eccentricity. I was drawing from life—a French officer whom I had known stationed at Rouen: evidently a man with a past which no one even dared to question. I calculated that in this way I should make time to choose my permanent course.

I soon had an opportunity of setting to work.

The officer who, as Olga had told me, was to be my chief second in the morning, Lieutenant Essaieff, came to see me. He was immensely surprised at the change in my appearance, scanned me very curiously and indeed suspiciously, and asked the cause.

"Drink or madness?" he put it laconically, in that tone of contempt with which one speaks to a distrusted servant or a disliked acquaintance.

Even my friends held me cheap, it seemed.

"Neither drink nor madness, if you please," said I, very sternly, eyeing him closely. "But a miracle."

"And which of the devils is it this time, Petrovitch?" he asked, laughing lightly. "Gad, he must have been hard put to it. Or is it one of the she-devils, eh? You know plenty of those. Let's have the tale." He laughed again; but the mirth was not so genuine that time, and I could see that the effect of the fixed stare with which I regarded him began to tell.

"I'm in no mood for this folly," said I, very curtly. "Save for a miracle, I should now be a dead man. That's all. And I'll thank you not to jest about it."

He was serious now and asked:—"How did it happen?"

I made no answer, but sat staring moodily out in front of me, and yet contriving to watch him as he eyed me furtively now and again, in surprise at the change in me.

"Are you ill, Petrovitch?" he asked at length.

"Hell!" I burst out with the utmost violence, springing to my feet. "What is it to you?" And then with complete inconsequence I added:—"I was praying, and in answer a light flashed on me and would have consumed me wholly, but for a miracle. Half my clothes and my face-hair were consumed—and I was changed."

"Ah, prayer's a dangerous thing when you've a lot of arrears to make up," he said with a sneer.

I turned and looked at him coldly and threateningly.

"Lieutenant Essaieff, you have been good enough to lend me your services for this business to-morrow morning, but that gives you no title to insult me. After to-morrow you will be good enough to give me an explanation of your words."

He had risen and stood looking at me so earnestly that I half thought he suspected the change. But he did not.

"You will not be alive to demand it," he said, at length, contemptuously, clipping the words short in a manner that shewed me how angry he was and how much he despised me. "I'm only sorry I was fool enough to be persuaded to act for you," he added as he swung out of the room.

I laughed to myself when he had gone, for I saw that I had imposed on him. He thought I was half beside myself with fear. Evidently I had an evil-smelling reputation. But I would soon change all that, I thought, as I set to work to examine all the papers and possessions in the rooms. I was engaged in this work when my other second arrived. He was named Ugo Gradinsk, and was a very different kind of man, and had been a much more intimate friend. He had heard of my accident and had come for news.

A glance at him filled me with instinctive disgust.

"What's up, Alexis?" was his greeting. "That prig Essaieff, has just told me you're in a devil of a funny mood, and thinks you're about out of your mind with fear. What the devil have you done to yourself?" He touched his chin as he spoke.

"Can't I be shaved without setting you all cackling with curiosity? I had half my hair burnt off and shaved the other half." He started at my surly tone and I saw in his eyes a reflection of the other man's thoughts.

"D'ye think you'll be a smaller mark for Devinsky's sword? It's made a devil of a difference in your looks, I must say. And in your manners too." I heard him mutter this last sentence into his moustache.

"Do you think I mean for an instant to allow that bully's sword to touch me?" I asked scowling angrily.

"Well, you thought so last night when I was giving you that wrinkle with the foils—and that was certainly why you got this infernal duel put off for a day."

"Ah, well, I've been fooling you, that's all," said I, shortly. "I've played the fool long enough too,

and I mean business. I've taken out a patent." I laughed grimly.

"What the devil d'ye mean? What patent?"

"A new sword stroke. The sabre stroke, I call it. Every first-rank swordsman has one," I cried boastfully.

"First-rank swordsman be hanged. Why, you can't hold a candle to me. And I would not stand before Devinsky's weapon for the promise of a colonelcy. Don't be an ass."

"My cut's with the flat of the sword across the face directly I've disarmed my man."

"And a devilish effective cut too no doubt—when you have disarmed him. But you'd better be making your will and putting your things in order, instead of talking this sort of swaggering rubbish to keep your courage up. You know jolly well that Devinsky means mischief; and what always happens when he does. I don't want to frighten you, but hang it all, you know what he is."

"I'm going to pass the night in prayer," said I: and my visitor laughed boisterously at this.

"If you confess all we've done together, old man, you'll want a full night," he said.

"The prayers are for him, not for me," and at that he laughed more boisterously than before: and he began to talk of a hundred dissipated experiences we had had together. I let him talk freely as it was part of my education, and he rattled on about such a number of shameful things that I was disgusted alike with him and with the beast I was supposed to be. At length to my relief he stopped and asked me to go across to the club for the last night.

I resolved to go, thinking that if I were in his company it would seem appropriate, and I wished to

paint in more of the garish colours of my new character among my fellow-officers. I made myself very offensive the moment I was inside the place. I swaggered about the rooms with an assumption of insufferable insolence. Whenever I found a man looking askance at me—and this was frequent enough—I picked him out for some special insult. I spoke freely of the "miracle" that had happened to me, and the change that had been effected. I repeated my coarse silly jest about praying all night for my antagonist: and I so behaved that before I had been in the place an hour, I had laid the foundations of enough quarrels to last me a month if I wished to have a meeting every morning.

"Ah, he knows well enough he's going to die to-morrow morning," said one man in my hearing. "It's no good challenging a man under sentence of death," said another; while a number of others held to Essaieff's view—that I was beside myself with fear, or drink, or both combined. I placed myself at the disposal of every man who had a word to say; but the main answer I received was an expression of thanks that after that night I should trouble them no more.

I left the place, hugely pleased with the result of the night's work. I had created at a stroke a new part for Alexis Petrovitch: and prepared everyone to expect and think nothing of any fresh eccentricities or further change they might observe in me in the future.

I reached my rooms in high spirits, and sat down to overhaul the place for papers, and to learn something more of myself than I at present knew.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DUEL.

THE discoveries I made were more varied and interesting than agreeable: and I found plenty of evidence to more than justify my first ill impressions of Olga's real brother.

It was time indeed that there should be a change.

The man must have gone off without even waiting to sort his papers.

Rummaging in some locked drawers, the keys of which I found in a little cabinet that I broke open, I came across a diary with a number of entries with long gaps between them, which seemed to throw a good deal of light on my past.

There were indications of three separate intrigues which I was apparently carrying on at that very time; the initials of the women being "P. T.," "A. P.," and "B. G." The last-named, I may say at once, I never heard of or discovered: though in some correspondence I read afterwards, I came across some undated letters signed with the initials, making and accepting and declining certain appointments. But both "P. T." and "A. P." were the cause of trouble afterwards.

I found that a number of appointments of all

kinds were fixed for the following afternoon. The initials of the persons only were given, but enough particulars were added to shew the nature of the business. Thus someone was coming for a bet of 1,000 roubles; a money lender was due who had seemingly declared that he would wait no longer; and quite a number of tradesmen for their bills.

I soon saw the reason for all this. I was evidently a fellow with a turn for a certain kind of humour; and I had obviously made the appointments in the full assurance either that Devinsky's sword would have squared all earthly accounts in full for me, or that I should be safe across the frontier and out of my creditors' way.

I recalled with a chuckle my words to Olga—that if I were to play the part I must play it thoroughly. This meant that not only must I fight the beggar's duel for him, but if I were not killed, fence with his creditors also or pay their claims.

I swept everything at length into one of the biggest and strongest drawers, locked them up, and sat down to think for a few minutes before going to bed.

If I fell in the morning I wished Rupert Balestier to hear of it; and the only means by which that could be done would be for me to write a note and get Olga to post it. Half a dozen words would be enough:

"My dear Rupert,

"The end has come much sooner than I hoped when writing you this afternoon. A queer adventure has landed me in a duel for to-morrow morning with a man who is known as a good swordsman. He may prove too much for me. If so, good-bye old friend, and so much the better. It will save

an awful lot of trouble; and the world and I are quite ready to be quit of one another. The receipt of this letter posted by a friendly hand will be a sign to you that I have fallen. Again, good-bye, old fellow. H. T."

I did not put my name in full, to lessen the chance of complication should the letter go astray. I addressed it, and then put it under a separate cover. Next I wrote a short note to my sister; and this had to be ambiguously worded, lest it also should get into the wrong hands.

"My dear Sister,

"You know of my duel with Major Devinsky and that it is in honour unavoidable. Should I fall, I have one or two last words. I have many debts; but had arranged to pay them to-morrow; and I have more than enough money in English bank notes for the purpose. Pay everything and keep for yourself the balance, or do with it what you think best. My money could be used in no better way than to clear up entirely this part of my life. I ask you to post the enclosed letter to England; and please do so, without even reading the address. This is my one request.

"God bless you, Olga, and find you a better protector than I have been able to be.

Your brother,
"Alexis."

This I sealed up and then enclosed the whole in an envelope together with about £2,000 in bank notes which I had brought with me from England. The envelope I addressed to my "sister" and

determined to ask my chief second, Lieutenant Essaieff, to give it to Olga, should I fall.

One other little task I had. I went through my clothes and my own few papers and carefully destroyed every trace of connection with Hamylton Tregethner, so that there should be nothing to complicate the matter of identity in the event of my death.

So far so good—if Devinsky killed me. But what if I could beat him?

The quarrel was none of mine. I had no right to go out and even fight a man in an assumed character, to say nothing of killing him. Look at the thing as I would I could make nothing else than murder of it; and very treacherous murder, to boot.

The man was doubtless a bully, and he seemed willing to use his superior skill to fix a quarrel on Olga's brother and kill him, in order to leave the girl without protection. But his blackguardism was no excuse for my killing him. I had no right to interfere. I had never seen her or him until the last few hours; and however much Major Devinsky deserved punishment, I had no authority to administer it.

Probably if the man knew how I could use the sword he would never have dreamt of challenging me; and I could not substitute my exceptional skill for Olga's brother's lack of it and so kill the man, without being in fact, whatever I might seem in appearance, an assassin.

If I were to warn him before the duel that a great mistake had been made as to my skill, I shouldn't be believed. He and others would only think I was keeping up the braggart conduct of that evening at the club. At the same time I liked the idea of the warning. It would at any rate be

original, especially if I succeeded in beating the major. But it was clear that I could not kill him.

All roads led round to that decision: and as I had come to the end of my cigar and there was plenty of reason why I should have as much sleep as possible, I went to bed and slept like a top till my man, Vosk, called me early in the morning and told me that Lieutenant Gradinsk was already waiting for me.

"That beggar, Essaieff, has gone on to the Common"—this was where we were to fight—"Told me to tell you. Suppose he doesn't care to be seen in our company. I hate the snob," he said when I joined him.

"So long as he's there when I want him, it's enough for me," said I, so curtly, that my companion looked at me in some astonishment.

"Umph, don't seem over cheerful this morning, Alexis. Must perk up a bit and *shew* a bold front. It's an ugly business this, but you won't help yourself now by ...."

"Silence," I cried sternly. "When I'm afraid, you may find courage to tell me so openly. At present it's dangerous."

Then I completed my few preparations in absolute silence, both Gradinsk and the servant watching me in astonishment. When I was ready, I turned to Vosk.

"What wages are due to you?" I asked sharply. He told me, and I paid him, adding the amount for three months' further. "You leave my service at once. I have no further need of you." I was in truth anxious to get rid of him.

"My things are here. I....." he began, obviously making excuses.

"I give you five minutes to take what is absolutely

necessary. The rest you can have another time. You will not return here."

"Do you suspect . . ." he began again.

"I only discharge you," I returned curtly. "Half of one of your minutes is gone." He looked at me a moment, fear mingled with his utter astonishment, and then went out of the room.

Five minutes later I locked the doors behind us and put the keys in my pocket.

"What has he done, Alexis? Isn't it rather risky? You've been so intimate . . . ." said Gradinsk, as soon as we were in the droschky.

"It is I who have done this, not he," I answered, sharply. "It is my private affair if you please."

"D—— your private affairs," he cried in a burst of temper. "Even if you are going to die, you needn't behave like a sullen hog."

I stared round at him coldly.

"After the meeting I shall ask you to withdraw that, Lieutenant Gradinsk," and we did not exchange another word till the place of meeting was reached.

We were the last to arrive: and there appeared to have been some doubt as to whether I should dare to turn up, I think; for I caught a significant gesture pass between my opponent's seconds.

How I looked I know not; but I felt very dangerous, and I tried to be perfectly calm and self-possessed and natural in my manner.

"Lieutenant Essaieff," I said, drawing my chief second on one side after I had saluted the others. "There are two matters to be mentioned. If I should fall, will you give this letter with your own hands immediately to my sister?"

"You have my word on that," he said, bowing gravely.

"One thing more. I have an explanation to make

to my opponent, Major Devinsky, which I think should be made in the hearing of all."

"An apology?" he asked, with a slight curl of the lip.

"No, but an explanation without which this duel cannot take place. Will you arrange it?"

He went to Devinsky's seconds, and then returning fetched me and Gradinsk, who was very nervous. I went up to the other group and spoke very quietly but firmly.

"Before the duel takes place, Major Devinsky, I must make such an explanation as will prevent its being fought under a mistake. I am a much more expert swordsman than is currently known. I have purposely concealed my skill during the months I have been in Moscow; but I cannot engage with you now, without making the fact known. I have indeed rather drawn you into this affair and I now desire you to join with me in declining to carry the dispute further. After this explanation, and at any future time I shall of course be at your disposal."

The effect of this short speech was pretty much what might have been expected. All the men thought I was trying to get out of the fight by impudent bragging, and Devinsky's seconds laughed sneeringly.

I turned away as I finished speaking, but a minute later, Essaieff brought me a message—and the contempt rang in his tone as he delivered it.

"Major Devinsky's reply to your extraordinary request is this: The only terms on which he will let you off the fight are an unconditional compliance with the condition he has already named to you. What is your answer?"

"We will fight," I replied shortly: and forthwith

threw off my coat and vest and made ready.

I eyed my antagonist with the keenest vigilance during the minute or two the seconds took in placing us, and I saw a certain boastful confidence in his looks and a swagger in his manner, which were eloquent of the cheap contempt in which he held me—a sentiment that was shared by all present.

My second, Essaieff, manifestly did not like his task; but he did everything in a workmanlike way which shewed me he knew well what he was about, and in a very short time our swords were crossed and we had the word to engage.

An ugly glint in the major's eyes told me he had come out to kill if he could; and the manner in which he pressed the fight from the outset shewed me that he thought he could finish it off straight away.

He was a good swordsman: I could tell that the instant our blades touched: and he had one or two pretty tricks which wanted watching and would be sure to have very ugly consequences for anyone whose eye and wrist were less quick than his own. As he fought I could readily see how he had gained his big reputation and had so often left the field victorious after only a few minutes' fighting.

But he was not to be compared with me. In two minutes I knew precisely his tactics and at every point I could outfight him. I had no need even to exert myself. After a few passes, all my old love of the art came back to me and all my old skill; and when he made his deadliest and trickiest lunges I parried them without an effort, and could have countered with fatal effect.

I wished to get the fullest measure of his skill, however, and for this reason did not attempt to touch him for some minutes. Then an idea occurred to me. I would prove to the men with us that I

had no real wish to avoid the fight. Intentionally I let my adversary touch my left arm, drawing a little blood.

They stopped us instantly; and then came the question whether enough had been done to satisfy the demands of honour. Had I chosen, I could without actual cowardice have declared the thing finished: but I intended them all to understand that I had to the full as keen an appetite as my opponent for the business. I was peremptory therefore in my demand to go on.

In the pause I made my plan. I would cover my adversary with ridicule by outfencing him at all points: play with him, in fact; and give him a hundred little skin wounds to shew him and the rest how completely he had been at my mercy.

I did it with consummate ease. My sword point played round him as an electric spark will dart about a magnet, and he was like a child in his feeble efforts to follow its dazzling swiftness. Scarcely had we engaged before I had flicked a piece of skin from his cheek. The next time it was from his sword arm. Then from his neck, and after that from his other cheek; until there was no part of his flesh in view which had not a drop of blood to mark that my sword point had been there. The man was mad with baffled and impotent rage.

Then I put an end to it. After the last rest I put the whole of my energy and skill into my play, and pressed him so hard that any one of the onlookers could see I could have run him through the heart half a dozen times: and at the end of it I disarmed him with a wrench that was like to break his wrist.

To do the man justice, he had pluck. He made sure I meant to kill him, but he faced me resolutely

enough when I raised my sword and put the point right at his heart.

"One word," said I, sternly. "I have put this indignity on you because of the insolent message you sent to me by Lieutenant Essaieff. But for that I would simply have disarmed you at once and made an end of the thing. Now, remember me by this...." I raised my sword and struck him with the flat side of it across the face, leaving an ugly red trail.

Then I turned on my heel and went to where my seconds stood, lost in staring amazement at what I had done. I put on my clothes in silence; and as I glanced about me I saw that the scene had created a powerful impression upon everybody present.

All men are irresistibly influenced by skill such as I had shewn under circumstances of the kind; and the utter humbling of a bully who had ridden rough-shod over the whole regiment was agreeable enough now that it had been accomplished. My own evil character was forgotten in the fact that I had beaten the man who had beaten everybody else and traded on his deadly reputation.

Lieutenant Essaieff came to me as I was turning to leave the place alone. He gave me back the letter I had entrusted to him, and after a momentary hesitation, said:—

"Petrovitch, I did you an injustice, and I am sorry for it. I thought you were afraid, and I had no idea that you had anything like such pluck and skill. I believed you were blustering; and I apologise to you for the way in which I brought Devinsky's message. But for what happened last night in your rooms"—and he drew himself up as he spoke—"I am at your service if you desire it."

"I'd much rather breakfast than fight with you to-morrow morning, Essaieff, if you won't think me a coward for crying off the encounter."

"After this morning no one will ever call you a coward;" said he; and I think he was a good deal relieved at not having to stand in front of a sword which could do what mine had just done. "Shall we drive back together?"

We saluted the others ceremoniously, my late antagonist scowling very angrily as he made an abrupt and formal gesture. Then I snubbed Gradinsk, who looked very white, remembering what I had said to him when driving to the ground; and Lieutenant Essaieff and I left together.

"How is it we have all been so mistaken in you, Petrovitch?" asked my companion when we had lighted our cigarettes.

"How is it that I have been so mistaken in you?" I retorted. "I chose to take my own way, that's all. I wished to know the relish of the reputation for cowardice, if you like. I have never been out before in Moscow, as you know; and have never had to shew what I could do with either sword or pistol. Nor did I seek this quarrel. But because I have never fought till I was compelled, that does not mean that I can't fight when I am compelled. But the truth's out now, and it may as well all be known. Come to my rooms for five minutes before breakfast—I am going to my sister's to breakfast—and I'll shew you what I can do with the pistols. It may prevent anyone making the mistake of choosing those should there be any more of this morning's work to do."

"I hope you can keep your head," he said, after a pause. "You'll be about the most popular man in the whole regiment after to-day's business. I

don't believe there's a more hated man in the whole city than Devinsky; and everyone's sure to love you for making him bite the dust. I suppose you're coming to the ball at the Zemliczka Palace to-night. You'll be the lion."

There was a touch of envy in his voice, I think, and he smiled when I answered indifferently that I had not decided. As a fact I didn't know whether I had any invitation or not, so that my indifference was by no means feigned.

When we reached my rooms I took him in and as I wished to noise abroad so far as possible the fact of my skill with weapons, I shewed him some of the trick shots I had learnt. Pistol shooting had been with me, as I have said, quite a passion at one time and I had practised until I could hit anything within range, either stationary or moving. More than that, I was an expert in the reflection shot—shooting over my shoulder at a mark I could see reflected in a mirror held in front of me. Indeed there was scarcely a trick with the pistol which I did not know and had not practised.

The lieutenant had not words enough to express his amazement and admiration; and when I sent him away after about a quarter of an hour's shooting such as he had never seen, he was reduced to a condition of speechless wonder.

Then I dressed carefully, having bathed and attended to the light wound on my arm, and set out to relieve my "sister's" suspense and keep my appointment for breakfast. I found myself thinking pleasantly of the pretty, kindly little face of the girl, and when I saw a light of infinite relief and gladness sparkle in her eyes at sight of me safe and sound and punctual, I experienced a much more gratifying sensation than I had expected.

Her face was somewhat white and drawn and her eyes hollow, telling of a sleepless, anxious night; and she grasped my hand so warmly and was so moved, that I could not fail to see that she had been worrying lest trouble had come to me through her action of the previous day.

"You haven't had so much sleep as I have, Olga," I said, lightly.

"Are you really safe, quite safe, and unhurt? And have you really been mad enough to go out and fight that man? Oh, I could not sleep a wink all night for thinking of you and of the cruel gleam I have seen in his eyes." And she covered her face with her hands and shivered.

"Getting up early in the morning always gives me an unconscionable appetite, Olga. I thought you knew that," said I lightly and with a laugh. "But I see no breakfast; and that's hardly sisterly, you know."

"It's all in the next room ready," she answered, leading the way. "But tell me the news:" and her face was all aglow with eager inquiry.

"I had no difficulty with Major Devinsky. As I anticipated he was no sort of a match for me at that business. I'm not bragging, but I've been trained in a totally different school, and—well, the beggar never had a chance."

She smiled then, and her eyes danced in gladness, but as suddenly grew grave again. Wonderfully tell-tale eyes they were!

"What about—I mean—is he hurt?"

"No, not much. Nothing serious. His quarrel wasn't with me, you see, so I couldn't kill him or wound him seriously. But you'll hear probably from others what happened."

"I want to hear from you, please. You promised the news at first hand remember."

"Well, I played rather a melodrama, I fear. I managed to snick him in a number of places till he's pitted a good deal. I gave him a lesson for having treated you in that way and also for his insolence to me. Besides I wished to make a bit of an impression on the other men there. He won't trouble us again, I fancy."

"He's dangerous, Alexis: mind that. Very dangerous. But oh, I'm so glad it's all over and you're safe and sound—And here's your favourite dish—though you don't know what it is."

"I don't care what it is. I'll take whatever you give me on trust." At that she glanced at me and coloured, and hung her head.

She was very pretty indeed when the colour glowed in her cheeks, and as a rather long silence followed I had plenty of time to observe her. She made a most captivating little hostess, too; and I began to feel that if I had had a sister of my own like her, I should have been remarkably fond of her, and perhaps—who can tell?—a very different man myself.

"By the way, there's one thing you must be careful to say," I said, breaking a long pause that was getting embarrassing. "You will probably be asked whether you knew that I was an expert with the sword and pistol and was purposely concealing my skill from the men here in Moscow. That's what I've said, and it may be as well that you should seem to have known it. A brother and sister should have no secrets from each other, you know."

She shook her head at me and, with a smile and in a tone of mock reproach, said:

"You haven't always thought that, Alexis."

"It's never too late to mend," returned I. "And

I'll promise for the future, if you like—so long as the relationship lasts, that is."

To that she made no answer, and when she spoke again she had changed the subject.

We chatted very pleasantly during breakfast, and I asked her presently about the dance at the Zemliczka Palace. She was going to it, she said, and told me that I had also accepted.

"Can a brother and sister dance together, Olga," I asked.

"I don't know," she replied, playing with the point as though it were some grave matter of diplomacy. "I have never had to consider the question practically because you have never asked me, Alexis. But I think they might sit out together," and with the laugh that accompanied that sentence ringing in my ears, like the refrain of a sweet song, we parted to meet again at the ball.

CHAPTER V.

GETTING DEEPER.

THE news that I had beaten Devinsky, had played with him like a cat with a bird, spread like a forest fire. Essaieff was right enough in his forecast that everyone would be delighted at the major's overthrow. But the notoriety which the achievement brought me was not at all unlikely to prove a source of embarrassment.

I should be a marked man, and everything I did would be sure to be closely observed. Any gross blunder made in my new character would be the more certainly seen, and would thus be all the more likely to lead to my discovery.

There were of course a thousand things I ought to know; hundreds of acts that I had no doubt been in the habit of doing regularly—and thus any number of pitfalls lay gaping right under my feet.

My difficulties began at once with my regimental duties. I did not know even my brother officers by sight, to say nothing of the men. The fact that the real Alexis had not been very long with the regiment would of course help me somewhat in regard to this; as it was quite conceivable that having been very indifferent to my duties and anything but a zealous officer, I might not have got

to know the men. But I was just as ignorant of the regimental routine which ought to be a matter of course. I had questioned Olga on every detail and drawn from her all that she knew—and she was surprisingly quickwitted and well informed on the subject—and I had of course my own limited military experience to back me; but I lacked completely that familiarity which only actual practice could give. This difficulty gave me much thought and I am bound to say amused me immensely. The way out that I chose was a mixture of impudence and eccentricity; and I relied on the reputation I had suddenly made for myself as a swordsman being sufficient to silence criticism.

I went back to my rooms, and while there a manservant whom Essaieff had promised to send to me, arrived. I would not have one from the ranks, but chose a civilian that had been a soldier; and under the guise of questioning his present knowledge of military matters, dress, etc., I drew out of him particulars of the uniforms I ought to wear on different occasions, the places and times of all regimental duties, and—what was of even more importance—a rough idea of the actual duties which fell to the share of Lieutenant Alexis Petrovitch.

That was enough for me. I dressed and went to head-quarters, resolved to see the Colonel, and on the plea of indisposition ask to be excused from duty on that and the following day. To my surprise —for I had heard from Olga that I stood very low down in Colonel Kapriste's estimation—I was received with especial cordiality and favour. His greeting was indeed effusive. He granted my request at once, said I could take a week if I liked, after my hard work, and declared that I must take great care of myself for the sake of the regiment. Then

he pressed me to wait until he had finished his regimental work as he wished to talk to me.

What he wanted was an account of the duel, and a very few minutes shewed me that if he was no friend of mine, he was a strong enemy of the man I had fought. He questioned me also as to the change in my appearance, why I had shaved my beard and moustache, what excuse I had to give for having been out without my uniform on the previous day; and my blunt reply that I had had an accident and hoped I was master of my own features, and that if my uniform was burnt it was more becoming for an officer to be in mufti than naked, drew from him nothing more than the significant retort that he hoped I had changed as much in other respects. Then he turned curious to know where I had learnt to use the sword, and who was the fencing master that had taught me; and I turned the point with a laugh—that Major Devinsky's evil genie conferred the gift on me, as they were not ready yet below to take charge of the major's soul.

He was so delighted with my success over the man whom he evidently hated, that he let my impertinence pass; but I could see that the two aides who were present, were as much astonished at my conduct as at the Colonel's reception of it.

But it was of great service to me. It emphasized the complete change in me; and I left with a feeling of intense satisfaction that the difficulties of the position were proving much less formidable when faced than they had seemed in anticipation.

I went next to the exercise ground and watched with the closest scrutiny everything that took place. Now and again one or other of the officers came up to me; and to all alike I adopted an attitude of

cold and stolid impassiveness. This was my safe course. I knew that Alexis had hitherto been unpopular with the whole regiment, except perhaps one or two of the worst and wildest fellows; and I judged that any approaches made now were rather out of deference to the dangerous skill I had suddenly developed than to any old familiarity. In most cases I could therefore quite safely appear to resent old neglect and so repulse any present advances.

"You're not at drill, this morning, Petrovitch," said one.

I gave him a stony, stolid stare.

"On the contrary, I am here," I answered, turning away.

"I mean, you're not drilling," he said, with a feeble laugh.

"I have already been out this morning," I returned giving him another most unpleasant look. "Do you mean that you want to drill with me?" I stared him out of countenance until the feeble laugh which he repeated had passed from his face, and with a muttered excuse he went back to his men.

This sort of thing with variations in my hard unpleasantness happened several times while I remained on the ground; and before I left I had managed to stamp the impression pretty clearly on my fellow-officers generally, that it would be best not to interfere with me. This was just what I wished.

At the club, where I went after leaving the exercise ground, there were several of the men whom I had so insulted on the previous night. I was in truth rather sorry that I had made such a cad of myself; since that was not the sort of character I saw now I could construct out of the composite materials of the two very different careers and persons that were now to be blended.

My reputation was made already and I found everywhere some evidences of the advantages it carried. More than one of those who on the night before had been most profuse in their expressions of contempt for me were now obviously very ill at ease; and some of them were unquestionably expecting me to take a strong course. But I spoke to no one; and merely returned a curt and formal acknowledgment of any greetings made to me.

After a time Lieutenant Essaieff came in, and I noticed not without satisfaction that as soon as he saw I was in the place he came across to me.

"I hear you have made a remarkable conversion, Petrovitch."

"Yes?"

"Old Saltpetre, I mean. Cruladoff told me and said he could scarcely believe his own eyes and ears when you and that old martinet were chumming together like a couple of young subs. He swears that a man has been cashiered before now for saying a good deal less than you said." I saw he was referring to the Chief, so I made a shot.

"It's not much of a secret what he thinks of Devinsky."

"Do you really know the story, then? Why, you told me last week that you didn't."

"I didn't know a good deal then that I know now," I returned drily.

"Neither did we," he answered significantly. "Any way the old boy swears by you now; and after you'd left this morning went on in a fine strain to the two aides, praising you sky high. By Gad, if the war really comes you'll be in luck, and get every bit of daredevil work the old Salamander can thrust your way. Hullo, Cruladoff!" he broke off as one of the men I had seen that morning

with the Chief came up. "I was just telling Petrovitch what you told me."

Some others joined us then, and though I held myself in the strongest reserve, I exchanged a few words with one or two. What was of great importance, moreover, I learnt to know a number of my comrades by sight and name.

My actions were all carefully studied. I spoke very little indeed; never dropped a word that had even a suggestion of boastfulness in it, and only answered when any man chose to address me. I knew from what Olga had told me that I was with some of the best men in the regiment—those who hitherto had held me in the poorest esteem—and I was scrupulously careful that in my outward demeanour there should now be nothing whatever to cause offence. I would allow no man to interfere with or even criticise me—but on my side I would interfere with none. The eccentricity that was to cover my ignorance should be defensive armour only.

In this manner I carried myself through the difficulties of that day; and it was indeed easy enough. I found most of my comrades only too ready to be civil rather than suspicious; and the extraordinary success of the morning set them on the look out for further eccentricities and peculiarities. A man who could successfully conceal the possession of such extraordinary skill with sword and pistol, might be expected to have any number of surprises in store; and no one was in any hurry to ask the reason for the concealment.

The fame of my achievement affected even the men who came to have their debts paid that afternoon and evening; and the money lender—a scurvy wretch of the lowest type—was so frightened and

trembled so violently when I asked him how he dared to send me threatening letters, that he could scarcely sign his receipt. The whole of them were certainly profoundly astonished at getting their money; and probably I should not have paid a kopeck, but for a change in my intentions that had begun to affect me.

I liked the promise of the new life for which I had exchanged my old and empty career; and I had begun to consider whether, instead of leaving when my passport came, I should not remain where I was and continue to be Lieutenant Alexis Petrovitch of the Moscow Infantry Regiment.

I had already done much to earn a title to the position. I had saved the real man's body by helping him over the frontier; I had saved his honour by fighting his duel for him; I had made his sister pretty safe from further molestation at Devinsky's hands; I had created quite a new Alexis Petrovitch in the regiment; and now I had paid the beggar's debts.

Obviously I could play the part a good deal better than he could, and therefore—why not continue to play it? There was plenty of danger in it. Siberia at least, if it was discovered that I had been personating a Russian officer and fighting duels in his name. But I cared nothing for that. If it threatened me, it had its compensations; since it made it quite impossible for the real Alexis ever to return and claim his position, even if he wished.

I had intended to fight for Russia in any event, supposing the war came; and if I fell in some battle it would not matter in the least how my grave was ticketed. It might save me no end of trouble, moreover, if I took the good the gods gave

me without bothering any more about volunteering.

The more I thought of it as I sat and smoked by myself, the firmer became my resolve just to float with the stream and remain what I was, till chance discovered me, if ever it did.

I had probably got over the worst danger by my impudence, my knack of fighting, and the extraordinary resemblance to my other self; and already I could see my way through many of the difficulties, so far as the regiment was concerned.

Moreover, I am bound to admit I liked the part. I had never had such a chance before; and if all the truth must be told, my vanity was not altogether proof against the sensation I was creating. I had had such a run of bad luck for the past few years, that a change was welcome.

By the time my reverie was finished, therefore, I had more than half resolved to be Hamylton Tregethner no more. Then it was time to dress for the ball at the Zemliczka Palace; and I was snob enough—I can call it nothing but sheer snobbery—so to time my entrance into the rooms as to cause as much sensation as possible. Though outwardly calm and quite impassive, I am positively ashamed to say I enjoyed the ripple of comment which I saw pass from lip to lip, and the evident interest which I awakened.

At the same time matters were within an ace of being very awkward. Any number of people came forward to speak to me, all of whom manifestly expected I should know them both by name and by sight. I had one greeting for all: cold, impassive, uninterested, though there were a number of very handsome women with whom I should have been glad to chat, if I could have done so safely. But I dared not.

Indeed the women worried me more than enough. The men I could stave off and keep at a distance easily; for in truth they all seemed shy of forcing themselves on me;—but the women wanted to compel me to take notice of them and were not to be put off by any excuse or shift. How many I ought to have known; with how many I had had flirtations, I of course had not the remotest idea. I was thus very glad when a chance of escape came with the entrance of Olga, who arrived with her aunt. The latter was rather a good looking woman, I thought; and I got away from the other people on the plea of having to go and speak to the two.

"Well, aunt, what do you think...."

"Aunt?" exclaimed Olga's companion, looking at me with unmistakable anger.

My sister flashed a quick danger signal at me. I had blundered badly.

"Alexis, your joke is very ill-timed," she said, severely. "You should know the Countess Krapotine better than to suppose that your barrack-yard jibes would be welcome."

"I hope the Countess Krapotine knows there is no one in all Moscow whose good will I prize more highly and would lose more unwillingly than hers. It was a silly jest: and was prompted only by a desire to claim even a passing relationship with one whom Moscow delights to honour. Her kindness to you, Olga, makes her kin to me."

"You are always a little hard on your brother, Olga," said the Countess, whom I had mistaken for an aunt many years older and infinitely ugly. But the matter passed, and as I did not care to stop and talk with them for too long, I left them after arranging which dances I was to sit out with my sister.

I did not dance with anyone: but contented myself with lounging about observing what was going on. I had more than one little adventure: but one in particular impressed me. I was leaning against the wall near an archway between two of the ball rooms when I noticed an exceedingly handsome woman making eyes and signs secretly to some one near me. She was a remarkably striking woman, tall, dark, handsome, and passionate looking; and after a minute I glanced round about me to see who the fortunate man might be. Just then there was no man at all near me: and looking furtively at her, I noticed that the signs ceased when I was apparently not observing her.

I looked at her openly and they recommenced immediately. It seemed therefore that they were meant for me. I tested this, until there was no room for doubt: and I looked at her with a little more interest, speculating who she might be, and what she was to me. But I made no sign that I knew her; as of course I did not; and after a minute or two I moved away, as it was time for me to go to Olga.

There was just then a little difficulty in getting through the rooms owing to the crush of people, and presently to my intense surprise a very angry voice whispered close in my ear:—

"Beware!"

I turned at once and found it was the handsome woman who had been signalling to me. The crowd had brought us close together, and she was staring hard at me, her face expressive of both agitation and ill temper. I was amused and without relaxing my features bowed as I muttered:

"I will."

This answer seemed to increase her anger, but

at that instant another movement of the throng separated us, and I went away to find Olga.

We sat and chatted and laughed together—especially at my mistake with the countess—and presently glancing up I saw opposite to us the woman who had acted the little bit of melodrama with me. She was eyeing us both now angrily.

"Who's that?" I asked, pointing her out to my sister. The girl shook her head gravely.

"I wish you didn't know, Alexis."

"Oh, do I know? I've put my foot in it then, I expect;" and I told her what had happened. She smiled, and then shook her head again, more gravely than before.

"All Moscow knows that you and Madame Paula Tueski are thick friends; and you ought to know that you have set many scandalous tongues wagging."

"Well, she's a very handsome woman," said I, glancing across at her.

"Your favourite style of beauty was always somewhat masculine and fleshly," said Olga in a very sisterly and very severe tone.

"Yes, I'm afraid I've not always admired those things I ought to have admired."

"Say, rather, you have often admired those things which you ought not. *Com*mission, not *o*mission."

"Well, I've a new commission now, and you gave it me," said I, playing on her word and looking closely at her. I took rather a pleasure in watching the colour ebb and flow in her bright expressive face.

She looked up now, very steadily, right into my eyes, as if to read my thoughts; and then looked down again and was silent. And in some way the look made me sorry I had jested. After a pause she said in her usual direct way:—

"We are wasting time. There is so much I must yet tell you, and some of it is very disagreeable. You and I have quarrelled more than once about that woman, Paula Tueski. You wished me to know her, and I would not; I wished you to give her up, and you would not."

"I'll do it at once," I said, readily. "I shall not feel the pang...."

"Do, please, be serious," she interrupted in her turn, with a little foot tap of impatience, while a frown struggled with a smile for the mastery in her expression. The smile had the best of it at first, but the frown won in the end. "Paula Tueski, you have often told me, is a dangerous woman. As wife of the Chief of the Secret Police she has considerable power and influence; though to be candid I never could tell whether you said this as an excuse for continuing your friendship with her, or because you were really afraid of her. You are not very brave, Alexis, you know."

"No, I'm afraid I'm not," I admitted. "But at any rate I won't try to force her on you for the future. I think I can promise that."

"She's an exceedingly ambitious woman, and means you no good, Alexis," said Olga, very energetically. "If you can give her up safely I hope you will." She was very earnest about this, and I was going to question her more closely when someone came up to claim her for a dance.

Very soon after this I left, taking care to keep out of the way of the woman who seemed so anxious that I should speak to her. I remembered the "P. T." of the diary and of the correspondence; and I saw that there might easily be some ugly complications unless I was very careful.

I walked home to my rooms and was very

thoughtful on the way. This legacy of old sweethearts was the most unpleasant feature of my new inheritance as well as possibly the most dangerous. It was just the kind of knot, too, that a sword could not cut; and before the night closed, I had a very jarring reminder of this.

CHAPTER VI.

A LEGACY OF LOVE.

As I approached the broad deep doorway of my house I saw a tall man muffled up, standing half concealed in the shadow of one of the pillars.

"Who are you, and what are you doing there?" I asked peremptorily, stopping and looking at him.

"What should I be doing, but waiting for Lieutenant Petrovitch?" answered the fellow, stepping forward.

"Well, I am Lieutenant Petrovitch. What do you want?"

"You are not the lieutenant."

"Then you are not looking for Lieutenant Petrovitch," I returned, as I opened my door. "Be off with you." I spoke firmly, but his reply had rather disconcerted me.

Instead of going he advanced toward me when he saw me open the door, and shot a glance of surprise at me.

"I beg you honour's pardon. I didn't recognise you; and when you pretended not to know me, I thought it was someone else. You've disguised yourself by that change in your face, sir."

There was a mixture of servility and impudence in the man's manner which galled me. He spoke

like a fawning sponger: and yet with just such a suggestion of threat and familiarity in his manner as might come from a low associate in some dirty work which he thought gave him a hold over me.

"What is it you want?" I spoke as sternly as before; and the fellow cringed and bowed as he answered with the same suggestion of familiar insolence.

"What have I waited here five hours for but to speak to your lordship privately—waited, as I always do, patiently. It's safer inside, lieutenant."

"Come in, then." It was clearly best for me to know all he had to say.

As soon as we were inside and I had turned up the lights I placed him close to the biggest of them; and a more villainous, hangdog looking rascal I never wish to see. A redhaired, dirty, cunning, drinking Jew of the lowest class; with lies and treachery and deceit written on every feature and gesture. The only thing truthful about him was the evidence of character stamped on his self-convicting appearance.

"I wonder what you are to me," I thought as I scanned him closely, his flinty shifting eyes darting everywhere to escape my gaze.

"Well, what do you want? I'm about sick of you." A quick lifting of the head and eyebrows let a questioning glance of mingled malice, hate, and menace dart up into my face.

"Lieutenant, your child is starving and his mother also; and I, her father, am tired of working my fingers to the bone to maintain them both."

"What are you working at now?" I asked with a sneer. I spoke in this way to hide my unpleasant surprise at the unsavoury news that lay behind his words. The more I looked at him the

more was I impressed with a conviction of his rascality: but the fact that he was a scoundrel did not at all exclude the possibility that some ugly episode concerning me lay behind. On the contrary it increased the probability.

"I've not come to talk about my work, but to get money," said my visitor in a surly tone. "And money I must have."

"Blackmail," was my instant conclusion: and my line of conduct was as promptly taken. There is but one way to take with blackmailers—crush them.

"Did you understand what I said just now? I am sick of you and your ways, and I have done with you."

The man shifted about uneasily and nervously without replying at once, and then in a sly, muttering tone, and with an indescribable suggestion of menace said:—

"There are some ugly stories afloat, Lieutenant."

"Yes: and in Russia, those who tell them smell the atmosphere of a gaol as often as those against whom they are told. A word from me and you know where you will be within half a dozen hours." This was a safe shot with such a rascal.

"But you'll never speak that word," he said sullenly. "We've talked all this over before. You can't shake me off. I know too much."

Obviously my former self had handled this man badly: probably through weakness: and had allowed him to get an ugly hold. He was presuming on this now.

I took two rapid turns up and down the room in thought. Then I made a decision. Taking ink and paper I sat down to the table and wrote, repeating the words aloud:—

"To the Chief of Police.—The Bearer of this——"

"How do you spell your rascally name?" I cried, interrupting the writing and looking across at him.

"You know. You've written it often enough to Anna."

Good. I had got the daughter's name at any rate.

"Yes, but this is for the police, and must be accurate." The start he gave was an unmistakable start of fear.

"Everyone knows how to spell Peter, I suppose. And you ought to know how to spell Prashil, seeing your own child has to bear the name."

"The Bearer of this, Peter Prashil, declares that he has some information to give to you which incriminates me. Take his statement in writing and have it investigated. Hold him prisoner, meanwhile, for he has been attempting to blackmail me. You, or your agents will know him well.

Signed, ALEXIS PETROVITCH.

Lieutenant, Moscow Infantry Regiment."

"Now," I cried, rising, giving him the paper, and throwing open the door. "Take that paper and go straight to the Police. Tell them all you know. Or if you like it better stand to-morrow at midday in the Square of the Cathedral and shout it out with all your lungs for the whole of Moscow to hear. Or get it inserted in every newspaper in the city. Go!" and I pointed the way and stared at him sternly and angrily.

"I don't want to harm you."

"Go!" I said. "Or I'll wake my servant and have the police brought here."

For a minute he tried to return my look, and fumbled with the paper irresolutely.

"Go!" I repeated, staring at him as intently as before.

He stood another minute scowling at me from under his ragged red brows and then seemed to concentrate the fury of a hundred curses into one tremendous oath, which he snarled out with baffled rage, as he tore the paper into pieces and threw them down on the table.

"You know I can't go to the police, damn you," he cried.

I had beaten him. I had convinced him of my earnestness. I shut the door then and sitting down again, said calmly:—

"Now you understand me a little better than ever before; and we will have the last conversation that will ever pass between us. Tell me plainly and clearly what you want. Quick."

"Justice for my daughter."

"What else?"

"The money you've always promised me for my services," with a pause before the last word.

"What services?"

"You know."

"Answer. Don't dare to speak like that," I cried sternly.

"For holding my tongue—about Anna—and—the child. I want my share, don't I?" he answered sullenly, scowling at me. "Is a father to be robbed of a child and then cheated?" He asked this with a burst of anger as if, vile as he was, he was compelled to stifle his sense of shame with a rush of rage.

"Hush-money, eh? And payment for your daughter's shame. Well, what else?" I threw into my manner all the contempt I could.

"My help in other things—with others." He uttered the sentence with a leer of suggestion that sent my blood to boiling point; and he followed it

up with a recital of mean and despicable tricks of vice and foul dissipation until in sheer disgust I was compelled to stop him.

What more the man might have had to say I knew not; but I had heard enough. It was clear that I was indeed a bitter blackguard, and that for my purposes I had made use of this scoundrel, who had apparently begun by selling me his own daughter. It was clear also that all this must end and some sort of arrangement be made.

At the same time I knew enough of Russian society to be perfectly well aware that not one of the acts which this man had suggested would count for either crime or wrong against me. One was expected to keep the seamy side of one's life decorously out of sight; but if that were done, a few "slips" of the kind were taken as a matter of course.

Personally, I hold old-fashioned notions on these things, and it was infinitely painful to me that I should be held guilty of such blackguardism. I would at least do what justice I could.

"I have been thinking much about these things lately," I said, after a pause. "And I have come to a decision. I shall make provision for you..."

"Your honour was always generosity itself," said the fellow squirming instantly.

"On condition that you leave Moscow. You will go to Kursk; and there ten roubles will be paid to you weekly for a year; by which time if you haven't drunk yourself to death, you will have found the means to earn your living."

"And Anna?"

"Your daughter will call to-morrow afternoon on my sister——"

"Your sister?" cried the man in the deepest astonishment.

"My sister," I repeated, "at this address"—I wrote it down—"and the course to be taken will depend on what is then decided. You understand that the whole story will be sifted, so she must be careful to tell the truth.

"The discreet truth, your honour?" he asked with another leer.

"No, the whole truth, without a single lie of yours. Mind, one lie by either of you, and not a kopeck shall you have."

With that I sent him about his business. I resolved to have the whole story investigated; and it occurred to me that it would be a good test of my sister's womanliness to let her deal with the case. I reflected too that it would do her no harm to know a little of the undercurrent of her brother's life.

That done, I turned into bed after as full a day as I had ever lived, and slept well.

Reflection led me to approve the plan of sending the old Jew's daughter to Olga; and after breakfast the next morning I wrote a little note to prepare her for the visit.

"This afternoon," I wrote, "you will have a visit from a girl whose name is Anna Prashil, and she will tell you something about your brother's history which I think your woman's wit will let you deal with better than I can. We will have the story sifted, but you can do two things in the matter better than I—judge whether the girl is an impostor; and if not, what is the best thing to do for her. I will see you afterwards."

I sat smoking and thinking over this business when my servant, Borlas, announced that a lady wished to see me; and ushered in a tall woman closely veiled.

I was prepared now for anything that could happen.

I rose and bowed to her; but she stood without a word until Borlas had gone out.

"Don't pretend that you don't know me," she said, in a voice naturally sweet and full and musical, but now resonant with agitation and anger.

It was a very awkward position. Obviously I ought to know her, so I thought it best to speak as if I did.

"I make no attempt at pretence with you," I said, equivocally. "But aren't you going to sit down?"

"No attempt at pretence? What was your conduct last night if not pretence—maddening, infamous, insulting pretence?"

I knew her now. It was the handsome angry woman whose signals at the ball I had ignored—Paula Tueski. She had probably come to upbraid me for my coldness and neglect. "Hell holds no fury like a woman scorned," thought I; and this was a woman with a very generous capacity for rage. If she recognised me....

"Won't you take off that thick veil, which prevents my seeing your very angry eyes. You know I always admire you in a passion, Paula." I did not know how I ought to address her so I made the plunge with her christian name.

"Why dared you insult me by not speaking to me at the ball last night? Why dared you break your word? You pledged me your honour"—this with quite glorious scorn—"that you would introduce your impudent chit of a sister to me at the ball. And instead, my God, that I am alive to say it!—you dared to sit with her laughing, and jibing and flouting at me. Pretending—you, you of all men

on this earth—that you did not know me! Do you think I will endure that? Do you think——" Here rage choked her speech, and she ended in incoherency, half laugh, half sob, and all hysterical.

I was sorry she stopped at that point. The more she told me the easier would be my choice of policy. From what she said I gathered this was another of the pledges made under the fear of Devinsky's sword.

"You know perfectly well that Olga is exceedingly difficult to coerce——"

"Bah! Don't talk to me of difficulties. You would be frightened by a fool's bladder and call it difficulties. I suppose you shaved your beard and moustache because they were difficulties, eh? Difficulties, perhaps, in the way of getting out of Moscow unrecognised on the eve of a fight? You know what I mean, eh?"

For a moment I half thought she, or the police agents of her husband might have guessed the truth, and this made me hesitate in my reply.

"Did you think I was afraid to kill Major Devinsky, or ashamed to let it be known that I am the best swordsman in the regiment?"

"Why have you never told me that?" she cried with feminine inconsequence. "I don't understand you, Alexis. You want me one day to get this man assassinated because you say you know he can run you through the body just as he pleases, and you promise me the friendship of your sister if I will do it; and yet the very next, you go out and meet him and he has not a chance with you. But why did you do it? I have heard of it all. Did you want to try me?"

I thanked her mentally for that cue.

"At all events two things are clear now," I

said. "I did not want to get out of Moscow for fear of Devinsky, and you would not do that which I told you could alone save my life. You did not think my life worth saving." I spoke very coldly and deliberately.

"So that is it?" she cried, with a quick return of her rage. "You insult me before all Moscow because I will not be a murderess—your hired assassin."

It was an excellent situation. If I had devised it myself, I could not have arranged it more deftly, I thought.

I shrugged my shoulders and said nothing; but the silence and the gesture were more expressive than many words.

My visitor tore off the veil she had worn till now, and throwing herself into a chair looked at me as though trying to read my innermost thoughts: while I was trying to read hers and was more than half suspicious that she might see enough to let her jump at the truth.

But a rapid reflection shewed me I should be wise to use the means she herself had supplied, as an excuse for the change in me toward her. It was dangerous, of course, to set at defiance a woman of her manifest force of character and in her position; but in attempting to continue even an innocent intrigue with her there was equal danger.

She remained silent a long time, considering as it seemed to me, how she should prevent my breaking away from her. She was a clever woman, and now that the first outburst of emotion was over, she abandoned all hysterical display and resolved, as her words soon proved, to appeal to my fears rather than to any old love.

She laughed very softly and musically when she spoke next.

"So you think you can do as you will with me, Alexis?"

"On the contrary," I replied, quite as gently and with an answering smile. "I have no wish to have anything at all to do with you."

"Yet you loved me once," she murmured, the involuntary closing of her eyelids being the only sign of the pain my brutal words caused.

"The sweetest things in life are the memories of the past, Paula. If you really loved me as you said, it will be something for you to remember that while you prized my life, you held my love."

"A man would starve on the memory of yesterday's dinner."

"True; or hope that somebody else will give him even a more satisfying meal."

"You could always turn a woman's phrases, Alexis."

"And you a man's head, Paula."

"Bah! I have not come here to cap phrases."

"Yet there can be little else than phrases between us for the future. You have shewn me what store you set on my life."

"Did you think I could love you if you were such a coward that you dared not fight a duel?"

"You thought I dared not when you refused to help me."

"You said you dared not. But do you think I believed you? Could I believe so meanly of the man I loved?"

"You discussed the matter as if you believed it," said I; making a leap in the dark and blundering badly.

"Discussed it? What do you mean? With whom? Do you think I am mad? I sat down at once and answered your mad letter in the only way it could be answered."

Great Heavens! I had apparently been fool enough in my desperate cowardice to actually write the proposal. The letter itself, if she dared to use it, spelt certain ruin.

"Well, you answered the test your own way, and...." I shrugged my shoulders as a suggestive end to the sentence.

She paused a moment looking thoughtfully at me. Then knitting her brows, she asked:

"What is the real meaning of this change, Alexis? Do try for once to be frank. You have always half a dozen secret meanings. You have boasted of this in regard to others—perhaps because you were afraid to do anything else."

"Are you a judge of my fears? I think I have already shewn you that that which I led you to believe frightened me most had in reality no terrors at all for me."

"One thing I know you are afraid of—to break with me." This came with a flash of impetuous anger, bursting out in spite of her efforts at self-restraint.

I smiled.

"We shall see. I have not broken with you. It is you who have broken with me. How often have you not sworn to me," I cried passionately, making another shot—"that there was nothing upon this earth that you would not do if I only asked you? What value should I now set on a broken love-vow?"

"Had I thought you were even in danger, I would have dared even that, Alexis, dangerous and desperate as you know such a hazard must be." She spoke now with a depth of tone that was eloquent of feeling. "What I told you is true—and you know it. There is nothing I will not do

for you. Bid me do it now to shew you my earnestness. Shall I leave my husband?—I will do it. Shall I tell the world of Moscow the tale of my love?—I will do it. Nay, bid me strip myself and walk naked through the streets of the city, calling on your name and proclaiming my love—and I will do it with a smile, glorying in my shame because it brings you to me and me to you—never to part again."

This flood of passion spoken with such earnestness as I had never heard from the lips of woman before was almost more than I could endure to hear without telling the truth to her. It abashed me, and the story of the deception I was practising on her rose to my lips: but before I could speak she had resumed, and her wonderful voice had a power such as I cannot describe. It seemed to compel sympathy; and as it became the vehicle for every varying phase of feeling it almost raised an echo of feeling in me.

"You don't know the fire you have kindled; you don't dream of its volcanic fierceness. I do not think I myself knew it until last night when you turned from me in silence and coldness, as though, my God! as though your lips had never rested on mine, or mine on yours, in pledge of delirious passion. Ah me! You cannot act like this, Alexis. It was you who warmed into life the love that burns in me, and it is not yours to quench. You must not, cannot, aye—and dare not do it. You know this. Come, say that all this is just your pique, your temper, your whim, your test, your anything; and that all is still between us as it must always be—always, Alexis, always."

If I had been the man she thought I was, I cannot but believe she would have prevailed with me. The seductiveness of her manner, her absolute

self abandonment, and the plain and unmistakable proof of her love, were enough to touch any man placed as he would have been.

But I had nothing to prompt my kinder impulses. She was only a stranger: infinitely beautiful, passionate, and melting: but yet nothing more than a stranger. And I had no answering passion to be fired by her glances, her pleas, and her love. She was a hindrance to me; and I was only conscious that I was in a way compelled to act the part of a cad in listening to her and cheating her. And I could only remain silent.

She read my silence for obstinacy, and then began to shew the nature of the power she held over me. I was glad of this; as it seemed to give me a sort of justification for my action. It was an attack; and I had to defend myself.

"You do not answer me. You are cold, moody, silent—and yet not unmoved. I wonder of what you are thinking. Yet there can be but one burden of your thoughts. You are mine, Alexis, mine; always, till death—as you have sworn often enough. And after your bravery I love you more than ever. I love a brave man, Alexis. Every brave man. I would give them the kiss of honour. And that you are the bravest of them all is to me the sweetest of knowledge. Yesterday, when I heard how you had humbled that bully, I could do naught but thrill with pride every time I thought of it. It was my Alexis who had done it. Won't you kiss me once as I kissed you a thousand times in thought yesterday? No? Well, you will before I go. And then I began to think how glad I was that I had made it impossible for you ever to think of giving me up. I know you are brave;—but even the bravest men shudder at the whisper of Siberia."

She paused to give this time to work its effect.

"I wonder how other women love; whether, like me, they think it fair to weave a net round the man they love, strong enough to hold the strongest, wide enough to reach to the Poles, and yet fine enough to be unseen?" She laughed. "I have done this with you, sweetheart. You know how often you have asked me for information and I have got it for you—you have wanted it for the Nihilists. Knowing this I have given it and—you have used it. Once or twice you have told them what was not true, and now you are suspected and in some danger of your life. But you are guarded also and watched. Two days ago you were at the railway station in private clothes and with your dear face shaven; you were trying to leave Moscow. But you probably saw the uselessness of the attempt and gave it up. Had you really tried, you would have been stopped. Do you think you can hope to escape from me? Do you think you can break through the net-work of the most wonderful police system the world ever knew? Psh! Do not dream of it. Moscow is a fine, large, splendid city. But Moscow is also a prison; and the man who would seek to break out of it, but dashes his breast against the drawn sword of implacable authority."

"You have a pleasant humour, and a light touch in your methods of wooing," said I, bitterly. She had made a great impression on me.

"The wooing is complete, Alexis. It was your work. I do but guard against being deceived. Escape from Moscow being hopeless for you, you have only to remember that a word from me in my husband's ear will open for you the dumb horrid mouth of a Russian dungeon which will either close

on you for ever, or let you out branded, disgraced, and manacled to start on the long hopeless march to Siberia."

I had rather admired the woman before; now I began to hate her. I could not fail to see the truth behind her words; and a flash of inspiration shewed me now that the safest course I could take was to shake off the character I had so lightly assumed. But her next words bared the impossibility of that.

"Do you think now it is safe to break away from me? But that is not all. There is another consideration. You have drawn your sister into these Nihilist snares. You know how she is compromised. I know it too. There are more dungeons than one in Russia. If you were in one, I would see to it that she, who has scorned and flouted and insulted me, was in another; with her chance also of a jaunt across the plains." The flippancy of this last phrase was a measure of her hate.

The thought of the poor girl's danger beat me. What this woman said was all true—damnably, horribly, sickeningly true.

"Have you planned all this?" I asked, when I could bring myself to speak calmly.

"No, no, Heaven forbid. I had not a thought of it in all my heart; not a thought, save of love and a desire to shield you from any real danger that threatened you, till,"—and her voice changed suddenly —"yesterday, when you loosed all the torrents that can flow from a jealous woman's heart. I am a woman; but I am a Russian."

She was lying now, for she was contradicting what she had said just before.

"My sister's fate is nothing to me," I said, callously. "She has made her bed, let her lie on it. But as for myself"—I had but one possible

course to seem to yield—"I care nothing. I am not the coward you once thought me, and my meeting with Devinsky shews you that clearly enough. But I doubted your love when I found you did not answer to the test I made."

"You do not doubt it now. I am here at the risk of my life; at the risk of both our lives," she said, her eyes aflame with feeling as she hung on my deliberately spoken words.

"This morning has been a further test, and I should not be a sane man if I doubted you now, or ever again."

"Then kiss me, Alexis."

She sprang from her chair and threw herself into my arms, loading me with wild tempestuous caresses, like a woman distraught with passion.

I hated myself even while I endured it; and nothing would have made me play so loathesome and repugnant a part but the thought that Olga's safety demanded it.

She was still clinging about me, calling me by my name, caressing me, upbraiding me for my coldness, and chiding me for having put her to such a test, when a loud knock at the door of the room disturbed us both.

It was my discreet servant Borlas; the loudness of his knock being the measure of his discretion.

He said that my sister was waiting to see me.

CHAPTER VII.

A LESSON IN NIHILISM.

I WAS not a little annoyed that so soon after Olga had warned me against the wiles of Paula Tueski, she should come just when my most unwelcome lover was in my rooms—and at such a moment. But I thrust aside my irritation—which was not against Olga—and went to her, curious to learn what had brought her to visit me.

She told me in a few sentences. A friend had been to warn her that I was in danger from the Nihilists and that unless I took the greatest care, I should be assassinated. The poor girl was all pale and agitated with alarm on my account, and had rushed off to hand the warning on to me. She was half hysterical. She wanted me to fly at once, to claim the protection of the British Consulate; to proclaim my identity and get away even before my passport came from her brother.

"There is not the danger you fear, Olga," I said, reassuringly. "I shall find means to avoid it. But I want to speak to you about another matter. Paula Tueski is here"—my sister shrank back and looked at me with a hard expression on her face such as I had not seen there in all our talks. Evidently she hated the woman cordially. "You

are right in your estimate of her in one respect, and for the moment she has beaten me. Much as I dislike the business, we must manage to blind her eyes and tie her hands for the moment—or I for one see none but bad business ahead."

"How comes she to be here?" asked Olga, in a voice of suppressed anger.

"I will tell you all that another time," I answered, speaking hurriedly and in a very low tone. "Another point has occurred to me. She is very bitter against you and has been urging your brother to get you to receive her. This was to have been done last night. My apparent refusal to speak to her at all came as a crowning insult, and she was mad. There is one way in which I think we might the more easily deceive her, if you can bring yourself to do it. Come in now and let me present her to you: or let me go and tell her that you will call on her."

"Will it make things safer for you?" she asked, always thinking of the trouble into which she would persist in saying she had brought me.

"It would make them safer for you, I think."

"I care nothing for myself. She can't harm me. Do you wish it? Do you think it desirable? I will do it if you say yes." She spoke so earnestly that I smiled... Then she added:—"Ah, it is so good to have someone that I can trust. That's why I leave it to you."

"I don't wish it," I answered, gravely, "because she is the reverse of a good woman, but I do think it would be prudent."

"Let's go to her at once," cried the girl, getting up from her chair readily. "We can talk afterwards. That's the one privilege...." she checked herself and then coloured slightly. I pretended not to

notice it; but this absolute confidence pleased me not a little.

"Bear in mind, we are only playing a part with this woman," I whispered.

"I know. She is too dangerous for me ever to forget that, or to play badly." She dashed a glance of quick understanding at me and then seemed to change suddenly into a Russian grande dame. An indescribable air of distinction manifested itself in a hundred little signs, and she carried herself like a stately duchess, as we entered the room where Paula Tueski sat waiting impatiently.

A great glad light of triumph leapt into the latter's eyes as she saw Olga was with me, and she, too, drew herself up as I made the two formally known to each other. It was a delightful bit of comedy. Olga was full of quite stately regrets that she had not had the pleasure of knowing the other long before: said that her brother's friends were, of course, her friends; and that she hoped to call that week on Madame Tueski and that Madame would find an opportunity of returning the visit speedily. She made such an appearance of unbending to the other, that the difference between them was all the more pronounced.

Madame Tueski on her side was too full of the seeming triumph over us to be able to be natural with my sister; and she alternately gushed and froze as she first tried to captivate and then would remember that Olga was only consenting through compulsion to know her. The result was as ridiculous as an episode could be beneath which lurked such possibilities of tragedy.

It lasted only a few minutes when I suggested, and I had a purpose, that the two should leave the house together. I wished to get rid of Paula

Tueski without further love-making: and desired in addition that if there were any spies about the house they should see the two together, so that if any tales were carried to the Chief of the Police they should be innocent ones.

"I will call later in the day if possible," I promised Olga, as she left.

"Ugh, how I hate her;" was the whispered reply, inconsequential but very feminine. And I shut the door on the two and went back to my room to think out this new set of most complicated problems.

Paula Tueski's visit had changed everything; and I saw it would be foolish not to look that fact straight in the face. I could not see how things would end; but certainly flight, for the time, was simply impossible. For myself, I did not much care. I had had a few hours of excitement which had completely drawn me out of the morbid mood in which I had arrived in Moscow; and nothing had happened to make me much more anxious to live than I had been then.

Life might have been endurable enough, if I could have gone on with my army career as Lieutenant Petrovitch; but not if the abominable and disgraceful intrigue were to be added as a necessary condition. That would be unendurable: and had I been a free agent, I would have ended the whole thing there and then, by admitting the deception and putting up with the results. Indeed, it occurred to me that in a country like Russia, where I knew that courage stood for much and military skill for more, the reputation I had managed to make would be likely enough to tell in my favour if I told the truth and asked leave to volunteer.

But was I a free agent?

Look at the thing as I would I could see no means by which I could get out of the mess, even taking my punishment, without leaving my sister in deep trouble. If Paula Tueski found that I had humbugged her and that Olga was in the plot, it was as plain as a gallows that she would be simply mad and would wreak her spite on the girl.

Could I leave Olga to this? The words of confidence she had spoken were still echoing in my ears—and very pleasant music they made—and could I quietly save my own skin and leave her in the lurch? It was not likely that I should do anything of the sort; and I didn't entertain it for a moment as a possibility. The girl had trusted to me; and I must make her safety the first consideration of any plan I formed.

But how?

I could see only one way. It was that she should get out of Moscow, and indeed out of Russia altogether. It was not probable that the woman Tueski would place any obstacle in the way, provided I did not attempt to leave as well; and I came to the conclusion that the best possible course would be for Olga to take her departure at once. She could go and join her brother in Paris, or wherever he had gone; and then I could carry on alone the play, farce, burlesque, comedy, or tragedy, as it might prove.

It was early evening before I could get round to see Olga, and then I had to spend some time with her aunt, the Countess Palitzin, an ugly, garrulous and dyspeptic old lady, who wanted to hear all about the Devinsky business over again: and then went on to tell me of some famous duels that had happened in her young days.

I observed that Olga was very thoughtful during the interview with the aunt, but as soon as we were alone she put her hand into mine and with a look that spoke deep feeling and pleasure, said:—

"You could have done nothing that would have better pleased me—nothing could shew so clearly that you understand me better than anyone ever did before. I have seen the girl and listened to her story and questioned her. I think there is yet good in her and I am convinced she tells the truth. She longs to be separated from her dreadful father...."

"He leaves for Kursk to-morrow," I said.

"Good. Then I will make the care of the others my charge. I don't do much that is useful; and if I can make that life happier and give the child the chance of growing up to be a good Russian, I shall have done something. What say you?"

She seemed more admirable than ever in my eyes for this; but I hesitated a moment what to say; and she, quick to read my looks, added, her own features taking a reflection of my doubts:—

"But of course that is all subject to your opinion. Is there anything else you think better? But I should like this very much:" and a smile broke over her face.

"The plan is excellent; but there is a difficulty, unless you can make your arrangements at once and permanently, or at any rate for a considerable time ahead. Or you might perhaps better arrange for the mother and child to leave Russia."

The girl looked perplexed; and fifty little notes of interrogation crinkled in her forehead and shot from her eyes.

"There is something behind that, of course," she said. "What is it?"

"I think it would be the best plan if you yourself

were to go away on a little tour. You have had the idea of leaving Russia, you know, and going to your brother as soon as he has made a home in Paris, or wherever he stops."

"Well?" when I paused.

"Buntlly, I think you would be safer across the frontier;" and I told her at some length my reasons.

"But what of you? Do you think I do not wish to share the success which my brother is enjoying here? Or are you thinking of leaving Russia also?" By a swift turn of the head she prevented me from seinge her face as she asked this.

I laughed as I answered lightly:—"No. The state of my health, combined with regimental duties, social engagements, Nihilistic contracts, and other complications render it a little difficult to leave at present."

The girl did not laugh, however, but kept her face turned from me; and I could not help admiring the poise of the head and the graceful outline it made against the grey evening light falling on her from the window.

She seemed so much more womanly than the laughing girl I had met first on the Moscow platform, and it was difficult to think that so short a time had passed since then. I filled up the long pause during which she appeared to be making up her mind what answer to give me, by thinking what a pleasant sister she was and how sorry I should be to lose her.

"Well?" I asked, when the pause had lasted a very long time.

"I am very much obliged to you for your advice," she said, turning round and looking coldly at me, and speaking in a formal precise tone; "but I find myself unable to take advantage of it. I cannot

conveniently leave Moscow just now." Then just when I was at a loss to know how I had offended her, she changed suddenly. She stamped her foot quite angrily, a flush of indignation reddened her cheeks and her eyes flashed as she looked at me and cried:—And I thought you understood me! Do you think we Petrovitch's are all cowards? And that I am like Alexis, having got you into this fearful trouble would run away and leave you to get out of it alone?" For an instant she struggled with her emotion. Then she exclaimed: "It is an insult!" and bursting into tears she rushed out of the room.

I stared in blank amazement at the door after it had closed behind her, and wondering what it was all about, left the house in a medley of confused thoughts, in which regret for having in some clumsy way worried her and the consciousness that she was really a plucky girl intermingled themselves with the memory of how pretty she had looked in her emotional indignation. The thought of her tears, and that I had caused them, gave me the worst twinges, however; and this kept recurring and bothering me during the whole evening.

At the club, where I went from Olga's house, I was careful to maintain the same part as on the previous day: the character of a stern, reserved, observant man, moody but very resolute and determined. Not a sign of the bully nor a symptom of braggadocio: but just the kind of man who, while quite willing to let others take their own way in life, means to take his. Unready to force a quarrel, but equally unready to pass over a slight; and relentless if involved.

This was pretty much my own character, with some of the dash and life pressed out of it; and

it was easy enough for me to maintain it. That night I played a little. I knew I had formerly been a pretty heavy gambler; but to-night I purposely stopped short in the full tide of winning. I had lost at first, and the luck turned with a rush, as it will, and as soon as I had pulled back my losses I stopped, to the astonishment of all who had been accustomed to find in me a heavy plunger.

"You'll be donning the cowl, next, Petrovitch, and preaching self-denial," said one, a handsome laughing youngster who had been bemoaning his own losses a minute before.

"A good thing for the Turks, if he does it before the war," said another subaltern.

Some others chimed in, and it was easy to see from the drift of the talk how genuine was the turn in the tide of opinion about me.

I left the club and wanting fresh air while I thought over matters I went for a short walk. I knew the City pretty well, of course, owing to my long residence there; and the changes since I had left were not very considerable.

Walking thoughtfully down one of the broad streets I became conscious that I was being followed. I had had a similar sensation before; but what Paula Tueski had told me about being watched and guarded, and the warning that Olga had given me now caused me to attach more importance to the matter.

It is one of the most hateful sensations I know, to feel that one's footsteps are being dogged by a spy. I turned round sharply several times, and each time noticed a man at some distance behind me trying to slip out of sight. He was clever at his business, and several feints I made in the attempt to shake him off failed. But I escaped him at length in the great Church of St Martin. Everyone knows the

A swinging cut made another drop his knife with a great cry of pain.
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many outlets of that enormous pile. It has as many entrances as a rabbit warren, and most of them are nearly always open. I went in by one door and left instantly by another, and running off at top speed, I was out of sight before the spy could well know I had left the building. I seemed to breathe more freely as soon as I had shaken the fellow off.

I stayed out some time, renewing my acquaintance with several parts of the city; and it was late when I reached home—so late that the streets were deserted.

This fact nearly cost me my life.

I was passing a narrow street when, without the slightest warning—though I cannot doubt that in some way my approach had been signalled—four men rushed out on me with drawn knives. By mere chance their first rush did not prove fatal; for two of them who struck at me came so close, that the knives gashed my clothes.

But when they missed their chance, I did not give them another. I sprang aside, whipped out my sword, sent up a lusty cry for help that made the houses ring again, and set my back against the wall to sell my life as dearly as I could. They closed round me and attacked instantly; a swift lunge sent my blade through one of them, a swinging cut made another drop his knife with a great cry of pain, and an unexpected, but tremendously violent back-handed blow with the hilt of my sword right in the face sent a third down reeling and half senseless.

This sort of reception was by no means what they had expected; and as a shout in answer to my cry for help came from a distance, the unwounded man and the two who could get away rushed off at top speed; while the fourth who had only been

dazed, struggled to his feet and would have staggered off as well had I let him. But I stopped him, made him give up his knife, and then I drove him before me to my rooms—only a very short distance off—without waiting for the man to come up who had replied to my shout for help. I did not want any help now. No one man was at all likely to do me any harm, and I might thus get to know the cause of the attack, without being troubled with any outside interference.

"Now, why did you seek to kill me?" I asked sternly, as soon as the man was in my room. "You're not a thief; your dress and style shew that. Why, then, do you turn assassin?"

"There should be no need for me to tell you that," said he, speaking with vehemence.

"Nevertheless, I ask it," I returned, with even more sternness. Evidently I was going to make another discovery; and when the man waited a long time before answering, I scanned him closely to see if I could guess his object. Clearly he was no thief. He was fairly well dressed in the style of an ordinary tradesman or a superior mechanic; his appearance betokened rather a sedentary life and his muscles had certainly not been hardened by any physical training. As certainly he was no police spy. He was the last man in the world to have been picked out for such a job as that of the attempt on my life. There was no probability of there being any private feud against me; that seemed ridiculous.

I could only conclude, therefore, that the attack was from the Nihilists. The man looked much more like an emissary of that kind—able to give a sudden thrust with a sharp knife; but incapable of doing more. The instant I had come to this conclusion,

and I came to it much more quickly than I can write it, I resolved what to do.

"I am glad this encounter has taken place—not omitting the result, of course," I added grimly. "There is no cause whatever for this decree."

The man's lip curled somewhat contemptuously, as I made this protest. He seemed to have formed the average low estimate of the value of my word. Everywhere I turned I was met by the worthlessness of the scamp whose name I now bore. The contempt silenced, even while it angered, me.

"You did not attend," he said curtly. "A man's absence is poor proof of either innocence or courage. You are not only a traitor but a coward."

"What!" I turned on him as if he had struck me.

This puny, pale, insignificant weakling faced me as dauntlessly as if the positions were reversed and I was in his power, not he in mine.

"You are brave enough here now, no doubt—you armed against me unarmed." He threw this sneering taunt at me with deliberate insolence.

I stared at him first in amazement, and then in admiration.

I had but to raise my hand to kill him with a stroke. He read my thoughts.

"What do I care for my life, do you think? Take it, if you like. One murder more—even in cold blood—is a little matter to a soldier."

A couple of turns up and down the room cooled me.

"I don't want your life," said I, calmly. "Though it's dangerous to call me a coward, and were you other than what you are, I'd ram the word down your throat. With you, however, I'll deal differently. You say I was afraid to attend your last meeting. I'll do better than merely call that a lie, I'll prove it one. Call another meeting in as big

a place as you can, pack it with all the deadliest cut-throats you can find, resolve to shoot me down as I enter the door, and if I dare not attend it, then call me coward—but not till then." My blood was up now, and I spoke as hotly as I felt.

"Will you come?" asked the man.

"Call the meeting and see. Nay, more. Between now and the time of the meeting think of the wildest and most dangerous scheme that you can to test what a desperate man can do for the cause, and give me the lead in it. And when I've failed, write me down traitor, and not till then. And now, go, or by God I may forget myself and lay hands on you."

My voice rang out in such sharp stern tones that the man's antagonism was beaten down by my earnestness. My fierceness seemed to fire him, and when I threw open the door for him to go, he stood a moment and stared into my face, his own all eagerness, light and wildness. Then he exclaimed in a tone of intense excitement:—

"By God, I believe you're true after all." And with that he went.

It was not until the man had been gone some time and I was pacing up and down my room, still excited, and revolving the chances of this, perhaps the most desperate of all the complications which threatened me, that I saw a letter on tinted paper, lying on my table. I took it up and found it was from Olga, and my thoughts went back with a rush to her and to the circumstances under which I had left her that evening.

The letter was not very long.

"My dear Brother,

"I have not ceased to regret the hasty words I spoke to you this evening. Forgive me. Of

course you do not think me a coward; and I can see now that you must have some other motive for wishing me to leave Moscow and Russia, while you remain here alone to face—what may have to be faced. But whatever your reason is, I cannot do it. Do you understand that? I cannot. That is stronger than I will not. I think you know me. If so, you know that I will not. If I thought you believed me capable of leaving you in the lurch after having brought all this on you, I should wish I had never had—such a brother. I will never even let you mention the matter to me again.

Your sister,

OLGA."

I read this letter through two or three times, each time with a higher opinion of the staunch-hearted little writer. And at the end I surprised myself considerably by pressing the letter involuntarily to my lips.

She was a girl worth a good tough fight.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RIVERSIDE MEETING

THE Nihilists were not long in taking up my challenge; and on the following afternoon, the man whom I had interviewed in my rooms met me in the street and told me I was to meet him on the south side of the Cathedral Square at nine o'clock the next night. There was a peremptory ring in the message which I didn't care for, but I promised to keep the appointment.

I had thought out my plans and had come to see that the impulse under which I had spoken was as shrewd as the proposal itself was risky. If I was not to be a perpetual mark for their attacks, I must make an impression on them; and I saw at once that the safest thing that could happen was at the same time the most daring—I must take the lead. If some desperate scheme were placed in my hands for execution, I should certainly be allowed a free hand to carry it out, and as certainly have time in which to do it. That was what I needed.

I did not place the danger of attending the meeting very high. If I were not murdered on my way to the place, wherever it might be—and that was highly improbable—I did not think they would venture to kill me at the meeting itself. Moreover

I reckoned somewhat on the effect I believed I had created on the man in my rooms.

I took a revolver with me as a precaution; but I had little doubt about getting through the night safely.

It turned out to be a very different affair from anything I had anticipated, however, and taken on the whole it was perhaps one of the most thrilling experiences I have ever passed through. Whether I was really in danger of death at any time, or whether the whole business was merely intended to try and scare me, I don't know. But I believe that if I had shewn any signs of fear, they would have murdered me there and then. Certainly they had all the means at hand.

I met the man by the Cathedral, and muttering to me to follow him at twenty paces distance, he walked on and presently plunged into a labyrinth of streets, leading from the Cathedral down to the river in the lowest quarter of the town. The place was ill lit and worse drained, and the noisome atmosphere of some of the alleys which we passed and the mess through which we trudged, were horribly repulsive.

In the lowest and darkest and dirtiest of the streets the man stopped and with a sign to me not to speak, pointed to a dark tumbling doorway. As I entered it, I saw it was about the aptest scene for a murder that could have been chosen.

The place was almost pitch dark, and as we had stepped out of a very bright moonlight, I had to stand a moment to let my eyes accustom themselves to the change. Then I made out a broken, rambling stairway just ahead of us. Taking it for granted that I was to go up these, ignorant whether I was supposed to know the place, and quite

unwilling even to appear to wish to hang back, I stumbled up the stairs as quickly as the gloom would let me. When I reached the top I found myself in a long, low shed that ran on some distance in front of me to a point there I thought I could discern a faint light.

I groped my way forward, the boards giving ominously under my feet, when suddenly a voice said in a loud whisper out of the gloom and as if at my very ear:—

"Stand, if you value your life."

I stopped readily enough, as may be imagined; and then the silence was broken by the swishing, rushing swirl of the swiftly flowing river, while currents of cold air caused by the moving water, were wafted up full in my face. I strained my ears to listen and my eyes to see and craning forward, I could make out a huge gap in the floor wider than a man could have leapt, which opened right to my very feet.

What happened I don't know; it was too dark to see. But after a time there was a sound of a heavily moving body close at my feet, the noise of the water grew faint, and I was told to go forward. I went on until I was again called to a halt; and after a minute the sound of the rushing water came again clear and distinct, this time from behind me. Then a flaring light was kindled all suddenly and thrown down into the wide gap until with a hiss it was extinguished in the river below.

I knew what that meant. It was a signal that all hope of retreat was cut off, and the signal was given in this dramatic fashion to frighten me if my nerves should be unsteady. As a matter of act it had rather the opposite effect. I have generally found that when men are really dangerous they

are least demonstrative. These things—the darkness, the silence, the rushing water, the means of secret murder—were all calculated to frighten weak nerves no doubt, but they did not frighten me.

At the same time I saw that if the men wished to murder me, they had ample means of doing it safely, and that the situation might easily become a very ugly one.

Without wasting time I went forward again, and passing through a door which was opened at my approach, I found myself in the end room of a disused and tumbling riverside warehouse; the side next the river being quite open and over-hanging the waters. The place was unlighted save for the bright moonlight which came slanting in from the open end, and down through some chinks and gaps in the roof.

Scattered round the place were some thirty or forty men, their faces undistinguishable in the gloom, though care was taken to let me see that each man carried a knife: and when I entered, five or six of them closed round the door, as if to guard against the possibility of my retreat.

I glanced about me to see whom to address, or who would speak to me.

For a couple of minutes or more, not a soul moved and not a word was spoken. The only sounds audible were these which came from the river without; the hushed burr of night life from the dim city beyond.

"You plea has been considered," said a voice at length in a tone scarcely above a whisper; but I thought I could recognise it as that of the man who had been in my rooms. "It has been resolved not to accept it. You have been brought here to-night to die."

"As you will; I am ready," I answered promptly. "I am as ready to lose my life as you are to take it."

"Kneel down," said the man.

"Not I," I cried, resolutely. "If I am to die, I prefer to stand. But here, I'll make it easier for you. Here's the only weapon I have. Take it, someone." I laid my revolver on the floor in a little spot where a glint of moonlight fell on it. Then I threw off my coat and waistcoat and turning back my shirt bared the heart side of my breast. If they could be dramatic, so could I, I thought. "Here, strike," I cried. "And all I ask is for a clean quick thrust right to the heart." I was growing excited.

"No 13," said the man, after a long pause.

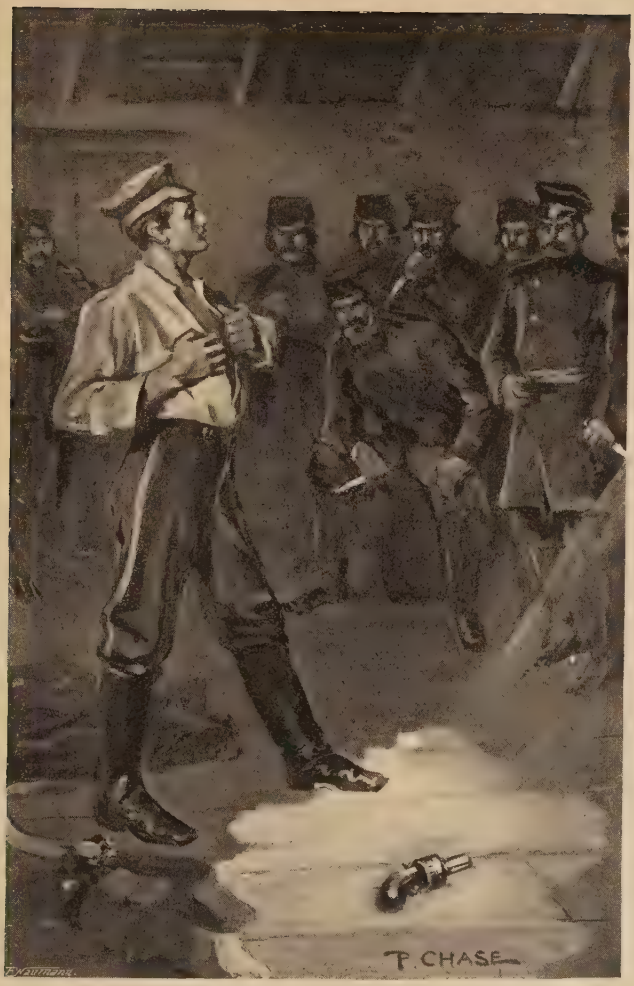
A tall, broad, huge man loomed up out of a dark corner and stood between me and the light from the river. As he laid his hands on me, the clasp was like a clamp of iron, and his enormous strength made me as a child in his clutch.

With a trick that seemed to tell of much practice, he seized me suddenly by the right arm, holding it in a grip I thought no man on earth could possess, and bending me backwards held me so that either my throat or my heart were at the mercy of the long knife he held aloft.

I let no sound escape me and did not move a muscle. The next instant my left hand was seized and a finger pressed on my pulse. In this position I stayed for a full minute. I do not believe that my pulse quickened, save for the physical strain, by so much as one beat.

"It is enough," said the man who had before spoken; and I was released.

"You are no coward," he said, addressing me.



"Here, strike," I cried.

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"I withdraw that. You can have your life, on one condition."

"And that?"

"That you swear..."

"I will swear nothing," I interposed.

"You have taken the oath of fealty."

"I will swear nothing. Take my life if you like, but swear I will not. If I had meant treachery, I should have had the police round us to-night like a swarm of bees. You have had a proof whether I'm true or not; and when I turn traitor, you can run a blade into my heart or lodge a bullet in my brain. But oaths are nothing to a man who means either to keep or break his word. What is the condition? I told you mine before."

"Yours is accepted. Your task is"—here he sunk his voice and whispered right into my ear—"the death of Christian Tueski."

"I accept," I answered readily. I would have accepted, had they told me to kill the Czar himself. "But it will take time. I will have no other hand in it than mine. It is a glorious commission. Mine alone the honour of success, and mine alone the danger, or mine alone the disgrace of failure." I looked on the whole thing now as more or less of a burlesque; but I played the part I had chosen as well as I could. And when the little puny rebel put out his hand in the darkness and clasped mine, I gripped his with a force that made his bones crack, as if to convey to him the intensity of my resolve and my enthusiastic pleasure at the grim work they had alotted me.

Then I was told to leave; and in a few minutes I was once more in the open air, quite as undecided then as I have always remained, as to what had been the real intentions in regard to myself.

One of my chief regrets was not to be able to see the burly giant who had twisted me about on his knee as easily as I should a fowl whose neck I meant to wring. He was a man indeed to admire; and I would have given much for a sight of him.

But my guide hurried me back through the labyrinth of streets into respectable Moscow once more, and I was soon busy with my thoughts as to how long a shrift I should have before my new "comrades" would grow impatient for me to act.

Certainly they would have plenty of time for their patience to grow very cold before I should turn murderer to further their schemes. But I could not foresee the strange chain of events which was fated to fasten on me this new character that I had assumed so lightly and dramatically—the character of a desperate, bloodthirsty, and absolutely reckless Nihilist.

CHAPTER IX.

DEVINSKY AGAIN.

It will be readily understood that I now found life exciting enough even to satisfy me. The complications multiplied so fast, without any act of mine, that I had no time to think of the old troubles and disappointments which had so soured Hamylton Tregethner, and emptied life for him. They had already faded into little more than memories, associated with a life that I had once lived but had now done with altogether. I was getting rapidly absorbed by the dangers and incidents of the new life.

How completely I had changed the current of opinion about Alexis Petrovitch I had abundant evidence during the next few days, in the form of invitations to houses which had hitherto been closed to me. People also began to remember Olga, and she shared in this way in the altered condition of things.

I did not tell her any particulars of my night with the Nihilists, nor of the mission with which I was charged. It would probably distress her, and could do no good; unless I might find it necessary to use it to compel her to leave Moscow. I questioned her as to her own connections with the Nihilists, and from what she told me I saw that

though they were slight in themselves, they were enough to put her in the power of a woman such as Paula Tueski; and decidedly much more than sufficient to make her arrest a certainty if I were to be arrested, or if anything should happen to throw increased suspicion on me.

Our meeting after her letter to me was a very pleasant one. She met me with a smile and begged me again to forgive her. That was not difficult.

"I can speak frankly to my brother, now. I couldn't always, you know, Alexis"—she glanced with roguish severity into my face—"because a few days ago you used to get very bad tempered and even swear a little. But I'll admit you are improving—in that respect; though I am afraid you are as dogged as ever. But I can be dogged, too: and if I speak frankly now, it is to tell you that nothing you can do will make me go out of Russia until you are safe. You may form what opinion you like of me—though I don't want that to be very bad—but a coward you shall never find me."

"I didn't think you a coward. You know that; you said it in your letter; and I shall not forgive that rudeness of yours, if you persist in this attitude."

"What is the use of a brother if one can't be rude to him, pray? As for your forgiveness, you can't help that now. You've given it. Besides, on reflection, I should not be frightened of you. Will you make me a promise?"

"Yes, if it has nothing to do with your going away."

"It has."

"Then I won't make it. But I'll make a truce. I will not press you to go away, unless I think it necessary for my own safety. Will that do?"

"Yes, I'll go then," she answered readily, holding

out her hand to make a bargain of it, as she added:—"Mind, if it's necessary for your safety."

"You're as precise as a lawyer," said I, laughing, as I pressed her hand and saw a flush of colour tinge her face a moment.

"Now," she said, after a pause. "I have a surprise for you. I have a letter from an old friend of yours—a very old friend."

"An old friend of mine. Oh, I see. And old friend of your brother's, you mean. Well, who is it now? Is there another complication?"

"No, no. An old friend of my new brother's. From Mr. Hamylton Tregethner." She laughed merrily as she stumbled over the old Cornish syllables. "I don't like that Englishman," she said, gravely. "Do you know why?"

"Not for the life of me."

"Well, I do not; but I can't say why." Her manner was peculiar. "See, here is the passport. Mr. Tregethner has sent it and he seems to have crossed the Russian frontier without the least difficulty. He has gone to Paris by way of Austria. When shall you go?" She did not look up as she asked this, but stood rummaging among the papers on the table. I took the passport, unfolded and read it mechanically; then without thinking, folded it up again and put it away in my pocket.

Evidently she meant it as my dismissal; and it was very awkward for me to explain that I could not be dismissed in this way because of the difficulties in the road of my leaving. I did not wish to appear to force myself upon her as a brother; but I could not go without first seeing her in safety. And there was the crux.

"I'll make my arrangements as soon as I can," I replied, after a longish pause; and I was conscious

of being a little stiff in my manner. "But of course I can't manage things quite as I please. You see, I didn't come into this—I mean, I took up the part and—well, I'm hanged if I know what I do mean; except that of course I'm sorry to seem to force myself on you longer than you like, but I can't get away quite so easily as you seem to think. I know it puts you in an awkward position, but for the moment I don't for the life of me see how it's to be helped."

As I finished she lifted her head, and her expression was at first grave, until the light of a smile in her blue eyes began to spread over her face, and the corners of her mouth twitched.

"Then you won't be able to go yet? Of course, it's very awkward, as you say: but I must manage to put up with it as best I can. In the meantime as we have to continue the parts, we had better play them so as to mystify people. Don't you agree with this?

"Yes, I think that, certainly," I answered, catching her drift, and smiling in my turn.

"Then I am riding this afternoon at three o'clock; and as it might occasion remark if our afternoon rides were broken off quite suddenly, don't you think it would be very diplomatic if you were to come with me?"

"Yes, very diplomatic," I assented, readily. "But you never told me before," said I, rising to go and get ready, "that we were in the habit of riding out together every day."

"It hasn't been exactly every afternoon," answered Olga, laughing. "In fact, it's more than a year since the last ride, but the principle of the thing is the same. We ought not to break the continuity."

"No, we ought not to break the continuity," I

assented, laughing. "I'll soon be back." I was, and an exceedingly jolly ride we had. Olga was a splendid horsewoman—a seat like a circus rider—and as soon as we were free of the city we had two or three rattling spins. As we rode back we discussed the question of the best course for us to take. We were both too much exhilarated by the ride to take any but a sanguine view; and so far as I am concerned, I think I talked about it rather as a sort of link between us two than in any serious sense.

When I got to my rooms I was surprised to learn from my servant Borlas that my old opponent, Major Devinsky, had called to see me. I did not know he was back in Moscow, though I knew he had been away. I had been at drill that morning—I had quickly fallen into the routine of the work—and had heard nothing of his return. Certainly there was no reason why he should come to me; though there were many why he should keep away.

He may have watched me into my rooms; for almost before I had changed my riding things, he was announced. He came in smiling, impudent, self assertive, and disposed to be friendly.

"What can you want with me that can induce you to come here?" I asked coldly.

"I want an understanding, Petrovitch...."

"Lieutenant Petrovitch, if you please," I interposed.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Lieutenant Petrovitch, I'm sure," he answered lightly. "But there's really no need for this kind of reception. I want to be friends with you."

I bowed as he paused.

"You and I have not quite understood each other in the past."

"Not until within the last few days," I returned, significantly.

"I'm not referring to that," he said, flushing. "Though as you've started it I'll pay you the compliment of saying you're devilish neat and clever in your workmanship. I had no idea of it, either, nor anyone less...."

"What do you want with me?" I interrupted, with a wave of the hand to stop his compliment.

"I want to talk quietly over with you my suit for your sister's hand. I want to know where we stand, you and I."

"My sister's hand is not mine to give." This very curtly.

"I don't ask you to give it, man; I only want to win it. I am as good a match for her as any man in Moscow..." and with that he launched out into a long account of his wealth, position, and prospects, and of the position his wife would occupy.

I let him talk as long as he would, quite understanding that this was only the preface to something else—the real purpose of his visit. Gradually he drew nearer and nearer to the point, and I saw him eyeing me furtively to note the effect of his words, which he weighed very carefully. He spoke of his family influence; how he could advance my interests; what an advantage it was to have command of wealth when making an army career: and much more, until he shewed me that what he really intended was to presume on my old evil reputation and bribe me with money down if necessary, and with promises of future help, if I would agree to let Olga marry him.

"Your proposal put in plain terms means," I said, bluntly, when he had exhausted his circuitous suggestions, "that you want to buy my consent

and assistance. I told you at the start that my sister's hand was not mine to give; neither is it mine to sell, Major Devinsky."

He bent a sharp, calculating look on me as if to judge whether I was in earnest, or merely raising my terms.

"I am not a man easily baulked," he said.

"Nor I one easily bribed," I retorted.

"You will have a fortune, and more than a fortune behind you. With skill like yours you can climb to any height you please."

"Sink to any depth you please, you should say," I answered sternly. "But my sister declines absolutely to be your wife. She dislikes you cordially—as cordially as I do: and no plea that you could offer would induce her to change her mind."

"You weren't always very solicitous about her wishes," he muttered, with an angry sneer. I didn't understand this allusion: but it made me very angry.

"You are under my roof," I cried hotly. "But even here you will be good enough to put some guard on your speech. It may clear your thoughts to know what my present feelings are." I now spoke with crisp, cutting emphasis. "If my sister could by any art or persuasion be induced to be your wife, I would never consent to exchange another word with her in all my life. As for the veiled bribe you have offered, I allowed you to make it, that I might see how low you would descend. Sooner than accept it, I would break my sword across my knee and turn cabman for a living. But your visit shall have one result—I will tell my sister all that has passed . . ."

"By Heaven, if you dare."

"All that has passed now, and if she would rather marry you than retain her relationship to me, I

will retire in your favour. But you will do well not to be hopeful." I could not resist this rather petty little sneer.

"You will live to repent this, Lieutenant Petrovitch."

"At your service," I replied, quietly with a bow.

He was white to the lips with anger when he rose to go, and he seemed as if fighting to keep back the utterance of some hot insult that rose to his tongue. But his rage got no farther than ugly looks, and he was still wrestling with his agitation when he left the room.

I could understand his chagrin. He would have dearly liked to force me at the point of the sword to consent, and the knowledge that this was no longer possible, that in some way which of course he could not understand I had broken his influence and was no longer afraid of him, galled and maddened him almost beyond endurance. He looked the baffled bully to the life.

It was two days before I had an opportunity of speaking to Olga about it. I had made a rule of seeing her daily if possible, lest anything should happen that needed explanation by her; but she was away the next day and our daily "business conference," did not take place.

She took the matter very curiously when I did mention it, however. She was a creature of changing moods, indeed.

"I have a serious matter to speak to you about; something that may perhaps surprise you," I said, when we were riding. "I am the bearer of a message to you."

"To me?" her face wrinkling with curiosity.

"Yes, to you. I have to be very much the brother in this; in fact the head of the family," and

then without much beating about the bush I told her of Devinsky's visit and of his desire to make her his wife.

She listened to me very seriously, scanning my face the while; but did not interrupt me. I had expected a contemptuous and passionate refusal. But her attitude was simply a conundrum. She heard me out to the end with gravity, and when I had finished, reined in her horse and for a full minute stared point-blank into my eyes.

Then she laughed lightly, and asked as she sent her horse forward again:—

"Do you think I ought to marry him—brother?"

Frankly, I was a good deal disappointed at her conduct. I did not see that there could be a moment's hesitation about her answer, especially after all she had said to me about the man. And this feeling may perhaps have shewn in my manner.

"I could do no less than tell you of the proposal, considering that Devinsky believes in the relationship between us," I said. "But I don't see how you, knowing everything, can look to me for the judgment I should have had to give were that relationship real and I actually head of the family."

This stilted reply seemed to please her, for she glanced curiously at me and then smiled, as I thought almost merrily, or even mischievously, as she replied:—

"A proposal of marriage is a very serious thing, Alexis."

"Yes, and so people often find it."

"Major Devinsky is very rich, and very influential. He is right when he says that his wife would have a very good position in one way in Moscow."

"I wish her much happiness with him," I retorted, grimly.

"He is very handsome, too."

I said nothing. She disappointed and vexed me.

"Ah, you men never see other men's good looks. You're very moody," she added, after a pause when she found me still silent.

"I don't admire Major Devinsky," I said rather sullenly.

She laughed so heartily at this and seemed evidently so pleased that I wished I had found the laugh less musical. Next, she looked at me again thoughtfully before she spoke, as if to weigh the effect of her words.

"It would be greatly to your advantage, too, Alexis, to have Major Devinsky...."

"Thank you," I cut in shortly. "I do not seek Major Devinsky's patronage. When I cannot climb or stand without it, I'll fall, and quite contentedly, even if I break my neck. Shall we get on?" And I urged my horse to a quick trot.

My evident irritation at her suggestion—for I could not hear the matter without shewing my resentment—seemed to please her as much as anything, for she smiled as her nag cantered easily at my side. But I would not look at her. If she meant to marry Devinsky I meant what I had said to him. I would have no more to do with the business, and I would get out of Russia as soon as possible the best way I could.

A sidelong glimpse that I caught of Olga's face after a while shewed me that the look of laughing pleasure had died away and had given place to a thoughtful and rather stern expression. "Making up her mind," was my thought; and then having a stretch of road ahead, I quickened up my horse's speed to a hard gallop and we had a quick burst at a rattling pace.

"Alexis, did you bring that proposal to me deliberately?"

—*Page 109.*

When we pulled up and stood to breathe our horses before turning their heads homewards, the girl's cheeks were all aglow with ruddy colour and her eyes dancing with the excitement of the gallop. She made such a picture of beautiful womanhood that I was forced to gaze at her in sheer admiration.

We had not spoken since I had closed the last bit of dialogue, and now she manœuvred her horse quite close to me and said:—

"Alexis, did you bring that proposal to me deliberately?"

"Yes. It was scarcely a question I could answer for you."

"Couldn't you?" Her eyes rested on mine with an expression that at another time I should have read as reproach. "Did you think there could be any but one answer?"

"No, I didn't. But one never knows," I said, remembering what she had said just before the gallop.

"Don't you? Well, you must think we Russian women are poor stuff! One day, ready to sneak off in disgraceful cowardice: and the next, willing to marry an utterly despicable wretch because he has money and influence and position. Do you mean to tell me that you, acting as my brother, actually let this man make this proposition in cold blood, and did not hurl him out of your rooms? You!"

I stared at her in sheer amazement at the change, and could find not a word to say. Nor was there any need. Now that her real feelings had forced themselves to words she had plenty: and for some minutes she did nothing but utter protestation after protestation of her hatred and

contempt of Devinsky: while her hits at me for having been the mouthpiece of the man were many and hard. What angered her was, she said, to feel that the smallest doubt of her intention had been left in Devinsky's mind; and it was not till I told her much more particularly and exactly all that had passed on this point that she was satisfied.

We had ridden some way homewards when her mood changed again, and laughter once more prevailed.

"So you told him I must choose between him and—my brother; or rather my present relationship to you?"

"I told him I would never speak to you again if you married him."

"Well, I have chosen," she replied at once. "I shall not give up—my brother," and with that she pricked up her nag and we rattled along fast, her cheeks growing ruddier and ruddier than ever with the exercise.

I couldn't follow her change of mood; but I was heartily glad she had decided to have nothing to do with Devinsky. She was far too good a girl to be wasted on him.

CHAPTER X.

"THAT BUTCHER, DURESCQ."

WE were not by any means done with Devinsky yet, however, and I was to have striking proof of this a couple of days later. I met him in the interval as men in the same regiment are bound to meet; and I deemed it best to avoid all open rupture, seeing that he was my superior officer, and unpleasant consequences to others beside myself might result.

I told him shortly that Olga declined his offer and that it must never be renewed. He took it coolly enough, replying only that his feelings for her would never change, nor should he abandon the resolve to make her his wife. Then he made overtures of peace and apologised for what he had said. I thought it discreet to patch up a sort of treaty of mutual tolerance.

I was speaking of this to Essaieff, to whom, in common with all the mess, Devinsky's infatuation for Olga was perfectly well known, and my former second seemed particularly impressed by it. Since the duel I had seen more of him than of any other man, and I liked him. I could be with him more safely than with others, moreover, because he had seen so little of the unregenerate Alexis. Every

man who had been at all intimate with my former self I now avoided altogether, because of the risk of detection—although this risk was of course diminishing with every day that passed.

"I don't like what you say, Petrovitch," said Essaieff, after he had thought it over. "I'm convinced Devinsky's a dangerous man; and if he attempts to make things up with you, depend upon it he's got some ugly reason behind."

"A reason in petticoats," said I, lightly. "A brother's a charming fellow to a man in love with the sister."

"No doubt; but he thought he was going to kill the 'charming fellow' in that duel. Why did he go away; and where did he go?"

"He didn't tell me his private business, naturally."

"Yet I'm much mistaken if it didn't in some way concern you."

"I don't see how."

"We don't see the sun at midnight, man; but that's only because there's something in the line of sight. Other people can see it clearly enough."

"Well, I don't see this sun, any way; and I'm not going to worry about it."

"Have you ever heard of Durescq? Alexandre Durescq?" he asked after a pause.

"No, never," I answered promptly, making one of those slips which it was impossible for me to avoid in my private chats. Essaieff's next words shewed me my blunder.

"My dear fellow, you must have heard of him. Durescq, the duellist. The man who has the reputation of being the best swordsman in the Russian army. The French fellow who naturalised, and clapped a 'c' into his name and cut off the tail of it to make Duresque into Durescq. Why, he was

here last year, and dined with us at the mess. Devinsky brought him. You had joined us then, surely and must have been introduced by Devinsky? You must remember him."

"Oh, that Durescq!" I exclaimed, as if recalling the incident.

"'That Durescq!' There's no other for the whole Russian army," said Essaieff drily. "And if he heard you say it, he'd want an explanation quickly enough."

"I was thinking for a minute of another Duresque, Essaieff, whom I knew much better. Different sex, whose killing of men was done in a different way." I smiled as I made the equivocation.

"I met him this morning," said my companion, not noticing my remark and looking more thoughtful than before. "I wonder if Devinsky's absence has anything to do with Durescq's presence; and whether..." he paused and looked at me. "It would be a damnably ugly business; but Devinsky's not incapable of it; and so far as I know, the other man's worse than he is. Moreover, I know that they have been together in more than one very dirty affair. There are ugly items enough standing to both their debits. But this would be murder—sheer, deliberate, damnable murder, and nothing else."

I had rarely seen him so excited as he was now.

"You think Devinsky has brought this man here to do what he couldn't do himself the other morning?"

"I don't say I think it," replied Essaieff, cautiously. "I shouldn't like to think it of any man: but if I were you I'd be a bit cautious about getting into a quarrel."

"Caution be hanged," I cried. "If that's their game I'll force the pace for them. We'll have a real fight next time, Essaieff, and we'll make the

thing such that one of us is bound to go under. But I'll have one condition, and one only—that Devinsky meets me first. And if I don't send him first to hell to wait for his friend or act as my *avant courier*, may I have the palsy."

"What a fire-devil you've turned, Alexis," said Essaieff, enthusiastically. It was the first time he had used my christian name, and it pleased me. "Even the rankers have found you out now. 'That devil Alexis,' is what they call you one to the other, since you beat their best men in leaping, and running, and staff playing. If the war comes, as like good Russians we pray it may, what a time you'll have. They'll follow you anywhere. Yes, there's shrewdness enough in your last devilment. If you insist on first killing Devinsky, Durescq will probably take back a bloodless sword to the capital.

His pithy reference to the feeling in the regiment touched my vanity on its weak spot, and gave me quite disproportionate pleasure. As we talked over this possible plan of Devinsky's I tried to get him to speak of the feeling again. It is rather a paltry confession to make; but the nick-name, 'That devil Alexis,' was exactly what I would have wished to bear.

Although Essaieff had suggested this action on the part of Devinsky, I scarcely thought it possible that he would do what we had discussed; but I had not been many minutes in the club that evening before the thing seemed not only probable, but certain; and I saw that I had a very ugly corner to turn.

Alexandre Durescq was there and I eyed him curiously. He was taller than I by an inch, but not so broad. His figure was well knit and lithe, and he moved with the air which a man gets

whose sinews are of steel and are kept in perfect condition by constant and severe training. He was the type of a sinewy athlete.

His face was a most unpleasant one. The features were thin and all very long; and the thinness added to the apparent abnormal length from brow to chin. His complexion was almost Mongolian in its sallowness; his hair coal black, and his eyes, set close to his large and very prominent aquiline nose, were small but brilliant in expression and seemingly coal black in colour. Altogether a most remarkable looking man; and I was not astonished that Essaieff had been surprised when I said I had forgotten him. He was not a man to be forgotten.

The expression of his face was sardonic and saturnine, and his manners and gestures were all saturated with intense self-assertiveness. He moved, looked, and spoke as though he felt that everyone was at once beneath him and afraid of him.

He was at the far end of the room when I entered, and I saw Devinsky stoop and whisper to him immediately he caught sight of me. The man turned slightly and glanced in my direction, and my instincts warned me of danger.

I would not baulk the pair; but I would not provoke the quarrel. I moved quietly about the room, chatting with one man and another; but keeping a wary eye disengaged for the two at the other end. Gradually I worked my way round to where they were, and both rose as I approached. I saw too, that Devinsky's old seconds and toadies were near and were watching me and smirking. They formed a group of three or four men who seemed to me to have intimation what was coming. They were waiting to see me "jumped."

I knew, however, that if I kept quiet, I should

make the task more difficult for the pair, and thus compel Devinsky to shew his hand; and so give me the pretext I needed to force the first fight on him.

"Good evening, Petrovitch, or Lieutenant Petrovitch, I suppose I should say," said Devinsky, and the instant he spoke I could tell he had been drinking. "I think you've met my friend Captain Durescq?"

"Not yet," I said, looking straight into Devinsky's eyes with a meaning he read and didn't like.

"Is this the gentleman who is so particular in asserting his lieutenancy? Good evening, Lieutenant Petrovitch." He said this in a tone that was insufferably insolent; and as if to point the insult, the two toadies when they heard it, sniggered audibly.

Nothing could have played better into my hands. All four made an extraordinary blunder, since they shewed, before I had opened my lips, that the object was to force a quarrel; and thus the sympathies of every decent man in the place were on my side. I kept cool. I was too wary to take fire yet.

"I thought you knew Captain Durescq when he was here last year," said Devinsky. "But you may have forgotten."

"Good evening, Captain Durescq," said I, ignoring Devinsky and returning the other man's greeting. "What is the latest war news in St Petersburg?"

"Bad for those who do not like fighting," he said, looking at me in a way that turned this to a personal insult.

"But good perhaps, for those soldiers whose swords are to hire," I returned, with a smile which did not make my point less plain.

The man's eyes flashed.

"They will take the place of your friends who

do not like the fighting," I added; and at this all about us grew suddenly silent.

"My friends? How do you mean?" asked Durescq stiffly.

"Those you mentioned in your first sentence. Whom else should I mean?" and I let my eye rest as if by accident on Devinsky.

"You have a singular manner of expressing yourself, Lieutenant."

"We provincials do not always copy the manners of the capital, you know," I returned in my pleasantest manner. "I think the provinces are growing more and more independent every year. We arrange our own affairs in our own way, have our own etiquette, form our own associations, and settle our own quarrels without aid from the capital."

I heard Devinsky swear softly into his moustache at this; but there was nothing for them to take hold of, though every man in the room understood what I meant; and nearly all were now listening.

"Yes, I have heard you have singular manners in the provinces. My friend here, Devinsky, has told me several curious things. I heard of one provincial for instance, who allowed himself to be insulted and browbeaten till his cowardice was almost a by-word, and it became really impossible for him to remain in the army unless he accepted the challenge he had so often refused. And then he begged, almost with tears, to get terms made; and when this was not done, he deadened his fears with drink and came to the club here like a witless fool, behaving like a drunken clown; and then at last actually went out and fought in a condition of seeming delirium. We do not have that in the capital. In St Petersburg we should have such a scabby rascal whipped on a gun."

A movement among the group of toadies shewed me how this burlesque of my conduct was appreciated there, while Devinsky was grinning boastfully.

"Did Major Devinsky tell you that?" I asked; my voice down at least two tones in my excitement, while my pulses thrilled at the insult. But outwardly I was calm.

"Yes, I think that's a pretty fair description, isn't it, Devinsky?" replied Durescq, turning coolly to the latter for confirmation. Then he turned again to me and asked:—"Why, do you recognise the description, Lieutenant Petrovitch?"

"You have not heard the whole of the story," I answered, getting the words out with difficulty between teeth I had to clench hard to keep my passion under control. "The man who was beaten in the duel left Moscow in a panic and went to St Petersburg for a purpose—that you may perhaps approve." There was now dead silence in all the room and the eyes of every man in it were rivetted on me. "The first object of the duel was that he might kill in it the man whose skill was thought to be inferior to his own, so that he might persecute with his disgusting attentions the sister of him on whom he had fixed the quarrel. Failing, he went to fetch a cleverer sword than his own to do his dirty work; and he fetched——" I paused and then my rage burst out like a volcano—"He fetched a butcher named Durescq to do butcher's work; and I, by God! won't baulk him."

With this I lost all control, and springing upon him I seized his nose and wrung it and twisted it, dragging his head from side to side in my ungovernable fury, until I nearly broke my teeth with the straining force with which I clenched them. Then

raising my hand I slapped his face with a force and loudness that resounded right through the room and made every man start and wonder what would come next.

"That is from the man you say dare not fight. One last word. Before I meet the butcher, I insist on meeting the man who hired him. Lieutenant Essaieff will act for me."

With that I left the room, feeling that although I was now all but certain to be killed by Durescq I should at least die as became "that devil Alexis."

CHAPTER XI.

DANGER FROM A FRESH SOURCE.

I WALKED home with a feeling of rare exhilaration. Whatever happened, this was my own quarrel, and I had so acted as to secure the sympathy of all who knew the facts. The quarrel had been fixed on me in public in a manner peculiarly disgraceful to both my opponents, and if they killed me, it would be murder.

If on the other hand I could kill either or both, the world would be the sweeter and purer for their riddance. Moreover I had so arranged matters that I saw how I should have at least an equal chance of my life. I should have the choice of weapons and I would fight Devinsky with swords and the "butcher" with pistols.

I thought much about Durescq's skill. He had a huge reputation both as a swordsman and a shot; but I was very confident in my own skill with the sword, and inclined to doubt whether he could beat me even with that. In the end, however, I decided not to run that risk. The issue should be left to chance. The duel should be fought with pistols. One should be loaded, and one unloaded; and a toss should settle which each should have. We would then stand at arm's length, the barrel of one

man's weapon touching the other's forehead. The man to whom Fortune gave the loaded weapon would thus be bound to blow the other's brains out, whether he had any skill or not. Both would stand equal before Fortune.

About an hour later, Essaieff came to me and told me that the whole regiment was in a state of excitement about the fight and that feeling against Devinsky had reached a positively dangerous pitch, especially when it was known that he had practically refused to meet me. That point was still unsettled, and Essaieff had come to get my final decision.

"My advice is, stand firm," he said. "You're in the right. There isn't an unprejudiced man in the whole army who wouldn't say you were acting well within your rights; just as, I must say, my dear fellow, you've acted splendidly throughout."

I told him what I had been thinking.

"It seems a ghastly thing to put a life in the spin of a coin," he commented.

"Better than to have it ended without a chance, by the thrust of a butcher's knife."

"That name will stick to Durescq for always," he said, with a slow smile. "It was splendid. Do you know you made me hold my breath while you were at him. Damn him, so he is a butcher!"

"Do you say Devinsky won't meet me?" I asked.

"No, not that he won't; but he raises the excuse that as Durescq's challenge was given first—as it was indeed—the order of the fight must follow the order of the challenges. But they arranged the challenges purposely in that order."

"I shan't hold to the point," I said, after a moment's consideration. "If they insist I shall give way and meet Durescq first. But this will only

make it the more easy for us to insist on our plan of fighting. Don't give way on that. I am resolved that one of us shall fall: and chance shall settle which."

Essaieff tried to persuade me to insist on meeting Devinsky first; but I would not.

"No. He shan't carry back to St Petersburg the tale that we in Moscow are ready to bluster in words, and then daren't make them good in our acts."

"I hope he'll carry back no tale at all to St Petersburg," answered my friend, grimly: and then he left me.

I completed what few preparations I had to make in view of the very probably fatal issue of the fight: wrote a letter to Olga and enclosed one to Balestier as I had done before; and was just getting off to bed, when Essaieff came back to report.

My message had added to the already great excitement and there had been at first the most strenuous opposition to our plan of fighting. But he had forced his way, and the meetings—with the "butcher" first and, if I did not fall, with Devinsky afterwards—were fixed for eight o'clock. He promised to come for me half an hour before that time: and he urged me to get to bed and to have as much sleep as possible to steady my nerves.

They were steady enough already. I gloated over the affair; and I meant so to use it as to set the seal to my reputation as "that devil Alexis," whether I lived or died.

But after all I was baulked.

I slept soundly enough till Borlas called me early in the morning and told me strange news. A file

of soldiers were in my room, and the sergeant had requested me to be called at once as he had an important message.

I called the man into my bedroom and asked him what he wanted.

"You are to consider yourself under arrest Lieutenant," he said saluting, and drawing himself up stiffly. "And in my charge."

"What for?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. I had my orders from the Colonel himself first thing; and, if you please, I am to prevent you leaving the house. You'll understand my position, sir. Will you give me your word not to attempt to leave?"

"Where are your written orders?" I knew the man well and he liked me.

"My orders are verbal, Lieutenant; but very strict and imperative."

"Privately, do you know anything of the cause of this?"

"You'll have a letter from the Colonel, I think, Lieutenant, within an hour, requiring you to go to him. Major Devinsky is also confined to his quarters, sir; and also, I think, Captain Durescq. We've heard in the regiment, sir, what happened at the officers' club last night." A certain look on his lined bearded face and in his eyes as he saluted me when he said this, told me much.

I chafed at the interference, and cursed the Colonel for having apparently taken a hand in the matter. This butcher would now be able to go back to St Petersburg with a lying garbled tale that we in Moscow got out of quarrels by clinging to the coat tails of our commanding officer; and it made me mad. I tried to persuade the sergeant to let me out to go to the place of meeting; pro-

mising to be back within an hour; but he was immovable.

"I would, if I dared, Lieutenant; but I dare not. I'm not the man to stop a fair fight, and I hate this work. But duty's duty."

When Essaieff came, he threw new light on the matter. The affair had caused a huge commotion. In the early hours of the morning he had been summoned to the Colonel, who had in some way got wind of the matter; a very ugly version having been told him. My friend had had to tell the plain truth and there had been the devil to pay. The wires to St Petersburg had been kept going through the night; the whole thing had been laid before Head-Quarters at the Ministry for War; and the arrest of the three principals had been ordered from the capital.

Soon afterwards a peremptory summons came for me from the Colonel and when I got to him I found both Devinsky and Durescq there, together with two or three of the highest officers then stationed in Moscow. A sort of informal examination took place, out of which I am bound to say both the other men came very badly; and in the end we were all three ordered off to stay in our quarters under arrest. I found that not only were we not allowed to go out—sentries being posted in my rooms all the time—but no one was permitted to enter: nor could I communicate with a single individual for two days.

At the end of that time the order came for me to resume duty; and as soon as the morning's drill was over, the Colonel sent for me and told me what had happened. The military authorities at St Petersburg had taken the harshest view of the conduct of my two antagonists. It was re-

garded as a deliberate plot to kill. Devinsky had been cashiered; and only Durescq's great influence had prevented him from sharing the same fate. As it was, he had had all his seniority struck off, been reduced to the rank of a subaltern, and sent off there and then under quasi arrest with heavy military escort, to a regiment stationed right away on the most southern Turkestan frontier.

"As for Devinsky, the regiment's well rid of him," said the Colonel, with such emphasis and earnestness that I saw his own personal animosity had had quite as much to do with the man's overthrow as the latter's own conduct. But it pleased the old man to put it all down to me, and when we were parting, he shook hands cordially and said:—"The Regiment owes you a vote of thanks, my boy; and I'll see that it's paid in full."

"One question I should like to ask," said I. "How did you get to hear of it all?"

"The news was everybody's property, lad, and —don't ask questions," he replied with dry inconsequence. And would say no more.

But I was soon to learn, and the news surprised me as much as any part of the whole strange incident.

The first use I made of my liberty was to go and see Olga and explain my absence and all that had happened. She had heard a somewhat garbled account of it in which the part I played had been greatly exaggerated, and she received me with the greatest tenderness and sympathy; and tears of what seemed pleasure, but she explained as cold, glistened in her eyes. We had a long and closely confidential chat; and she made me feel more by her trustful manner and gentle attitude than by her actual words, how much she had missed me during

the days of our separation and how thankful she was to be free of Devinsky for good, and how much she felt she owed to me on that account.

For myself I was sorry when I had to leave her. She was the only person in Moscow to whom I could speak without restraint; a fact that made our interviews so welcome that I was loath to end this one.

It was getting dusk when I left and as I walked home I was thoughtful and preoccupied. The question of Olga's safety was pressing very hardly on me and made me extremely anxious. The more I saw of her the more eager I was to get her out of harm's way; and the consciousness that she must share the consequences of any disaster that might happen to me, were I discovered, was pressing upon me with increasing severity. I was beginning to anticipate more vividly, moreover, the coming of some such disaster. The time was passing very quickly. It was getting on for nearly three weeks since the Nihilist meeting, and I knew that my Nihilist "allies" would be growing anxious for a sign of my zeal. They were probably well aware that I was doing nothing to redeem my pledge.

There was also the undeniable danger inseparably connected with the distasteful intrigue with Paula Tueski. I had so neglected her in my character of lover that I was hourly expecting some proof of her indignation. I had only seen her twice in the three weeks; and each time in public; and though Olga and she had interchanged visits, I knew perfectly well that she was not the woman to take neglect passively.

I blamed myself warmly, too, for my own inactivity. My whole policy had been so to try and gain time, and yet I had made no use of it, except to get

into broils which had increased the already bewildering complications.

That this would be the effect of my quarrel with Devinsky and Durescq, I could not doubt when I came to think the matter over in cool blood. I had been the means of both of them being ruined; and naturally every friend they had in Russia would take part against me. I knew that Durescq had friends among the most powerful circles in Russia, and I had nothing to oppose to their anger save the poor position of a lieutenant in a marching regiment and a past that was full of blackguardism and evil repute. Personally this was all nothing to me; but when I thought of the indirect results it might have for Olga it troubled and worried me deeply.

Everything pointed to one conclusion—that Olga should leave Russia while she could do so in safety.

I was meditating on these things when a girl stopped me suddenly, asking if I were Lieutenant Petrovitch. She then gave me a scrap of paper; and I glanced at and read it.

"*The old rendezvous, at once. Urgent. P. T.*"

I questioned the girl as to who gave it to her, and where the person was; but getting no satisfactory account, dismissed her with a few kopecks.

It beat me. Obviously it was from Paula Tueski. Equally obviously it was an appointment at which she had apparently something to say of importance. But where the deuce the "old rendezvous" was I knew no more than the wind.

I am not one to waste time over the impossible; and as I certainly could not go to a place I did not know of, I tore the letter into shreds and went on home.

I let myself in and found that my servant was

out—a most unusual thing at that time of the day; but I had begun to fear that the man was below rather than above the average of Russian servants and was already contemplating his dismissal. I did not attach much importance to his present absence, however; and throwing myself into a chair sat and thought or tried to think of some scheme by which I could induce Olga to leave the country, and some means by which her departure could be safely arranged. She must go at once. She had promised me to go when I could tell her it was necessary for my safety; and I could truthfully say that now. If she would go, I would have a dash for liberty myself.

While I was thinking in this strain someone knocked at my outer door, and when I opened it, to my surprise, Paula Tueski rushed in quickly.

A glance at her face shewed me she was in an exceedingly ill temper; as indeed it appeared to me she generally was.

"Where is your servant?" was her first question hurriedly asked.

"I really don't know. Out somewhere; but——"

"His absence means danger, Alexis. Why didn't you come to me when I sent a message to you just now. You read it, questioned the girl, and then tore it up and threw it in the gutter; and all this as unconcernedly as if you did not know full well that from our window you must be in full view of me. Are you always going to scorn me?"

I took care to shew no surprise; but it was clear I had blundered badly, and that the "rendezvous" was close to the spot where the paper had been given to me.

"I could not come. I had to hurry home. I——"

"Bah! Don't trifle with me like that. Haven't

you had enough of your prison during the last two days?"

"You know the news, then?" said I, following her gladly off the track.

"It is you who do not know the news. Ah, Alexis, you are giving me more trouble in this new character of yours than ever you did in the old one—much as you harassed me then. But I do not mind if only...." She stopped and looked at me with beaming eyes. "You have not kissed me; and here I am risking all again and even venturing right here into your rooms."

"What do you mean about new character?" I asked. Her phrase had startled me.

"I like it better than the old. Fifty thousand times better 'That devil Alexis,' than 'That roué Petrovitch.' But whenever I think of the change, I can't understand it—I don't understand you. I could almost swear, sometimes, you are not the same man"—she came close up to me and putting her hands on my shoulders, stared long and earnestly right into my eyes—"and then I wonder how I can have been so blind as not to have seen all that lay hidden in you: all that was noble and brave and daring. But I love you, Alexis, twenty thousand times more than ever; and to have saved your life now is a thought of infinite sweetness to me. Kiss me, sweetheart."

I started back as if she had stung me.

"Do you mean you had anything to do with..." I stopped, but she knew what I meant. She smiled and in a voice exquisitely sweet and tender, though hateful to me, she answered:

"Your life is mine, Alexis? Do you think I would let that butcher from St Petersburg take it? Let him keep to his own shambles. Yes, I set the wires

in motion, and I did not stop until the one man was utterly ruined and the other degraded in the eyes of all Russia. Your life is mine, Alexis"—she seemed to revel in this hateful phrase—"and those who would strike at you, must reckon with me as well. We are destined for each other, you and I; and we live or die together."

"You have done me a foul wrong, then," I cried hotly. "You have disgraced me; made me out for a braggart that provokes a fight and then shirks it by screening myself behind the law. Do you suppose I thank you for that?" I spoke as sternly as I felt. But she only smiled as she answered,

"I did not think of your feelings. This man would have killed you. His hands are bloody to the armpits. Do you think I would let him find another victim in you when I could stop him and save you? Did you not reproach me, too when I did not interfere before, and tell me my love was cold? Would I suffer such a reproach again, think you? No, no. Your life is mine, I repeat, and for the future I will protect it whether you will or no. That is how I love; and so it shall be always. I have come now to warn you. Hush! What is that?"

I listened and heard someone moving in the lobby of my rooms.

"It is Borlas returned," I said, and opening the door called him. Getting no answer I called again loudly; and then my visitor whispered to me to come back into the room. But I paid no heed to her, and went forward a few steps to go into my servant's room. As I did so, a desperate rush was made and three men disguised, dashed at me violently. They had gained an entrance somehow and were no doubt making their way to attack me in my room or were going to lay in wait for

me, when my quick ears heard them and thus spoiled their plans.

I was unarmed, and saw instantly the foolishness of attempting to fight three men, probably armed, while I had not so much as a stick. Making a feint of an attack upon the nearest, therefore, I jumped aside and darted back into the room I had just left, closing the door instantly behind me, while my companion and I held it shut until I had secured it.

Then I turned to her for an explanation.

"They are my husband's agents," she whispered. "He suspects us, as you know; and he arranged this attack, thinking that if you were killed, the act just at this juncture would be set down to Devinsky's revenge. I came on purpose to warn you. If they catch me here now, we are both ruined beyond hope."

"Then they shan't catch us," I replied. "Or if they do, shan't live to carry the tale outside the door:" and I proceeded to put in execution a plan which had already occurred to me.

CHAPTER XII.

CHRISTIAN TUESKI.

WHILE the men were straining and fighting to get admission into the room, I loaded my revolver, seized a heavy stick that lay in a corner, and opening the window noiselessly and with some little trouble and agility, got into the street. I let myself into the house and then I thundered at the outer door of my own rooms as if seeking immediate admission.

Instantly there was a great scuffling within, and I knew that the men were making off by the back, in the probable belief that they had been disturbed by some unexpected caller. Judging the time as best I could, so that I might perhaps catch one of them, I rushed in suddenly. One had fled, the second was in the act of dropping from a window, while a third was just clambering out.

I struck this one a blow on the head which laid him down senseless in a heap on the floor, and leaning out was in time to give the second a whack that must have nearly broken his arm. Then without wasting a moment I bound the man I had knocked down and closely bandaged his eyes.

Telling Paula Tueski that I had scared the rascals away, I dragged the fellow to the light, that

she might recognise him. She identified him directly, and without a word being spoken except by me, I thrust him into a dark closet and turned the key on him while I settled what to do next.

"You knew him, I could see," I said, when I joined my visitor again. "Is he a police spy?"

"No, not in the ordinary sense. I have seen him with my husband: but exactly what he is, I don't know. I believe he is one of a small band of really villainous men, used for especially ugly work."

"But why am I marked out for a visit from them?"

"I believe my husband has suspected you—on my account. I know he hates you cordially. You remember that affair in the Opera lobby, when you insulted him so grossly." I nodded: but of course I had not the remotest idea what she meant. "He never forgives. Since then he has been accumulating every jot and tittle of fact against you—and you have given him plenty, Alexis—and if he can work your overthrow, he will."

"Yes: but why try to get me assassinated. I'll go at once and ask him," I said, readily and impulsively.

"Are you mad?" exclaimed my companion.

"On the contrary, I'll go and shew him the danger of interfering with me. Where is he to be found now?"

"At home. He will not leave for an hour yet to make his evening visit to the Bureau. But he will never consent to see you."

"At any rate I'll try; and I'm much mistaken if I don't force him. I have a plan," I added, after a minute's thought. "I will clear us both at a stroke. Go at once to my sister, and tell her from

me that I wish her to come back here with you and wait for me. Mind, too, should anyone come to fetch away that fellow I've locked up, let Olga say enough in his presence to make it clear that she was here with us when the attack was first made. Be quick and careful: for much will depend on all this being well done."

I drove rapidly to the place and sending in my card asked for an immediate interview with the Chief of the Police, on urgent business. The reply came back that M. Tueski could not see me; I was to call at his office. I sent the messenger back with a peremptory reply that I must see him, as I had discovered an assassination plot. I was still refused admittance; though a longer wait shewed me he had considered the matter carefully.

This time I wrote a brief note:—"One of your hired assassins, has been identified, has confessed, and lies at this moment bound and in my power. If you do not see me now I shall communicate direct with the Ministry of the Interior."

That proved the 'Open Sesame,' and in a few moments, I was ushered into the presence of one of the most hated men in Russia,—the man I had been commissioned to kill.

He was a small man with a face that would have been common looking but for its extraordinarily hard and cold expression. It was lined and seamed in all directions: and each line might have been drawn by Nature with the express object of marking him out as an absolutely merciless, calculating, and emotionless man.

His eyes were very bright as they fixed on me, and his voice, harsh, high pitched and tuneless.

"Men don't belie your new character when they call you daring," was his greeting.

He was standing by the side of a long table with his black clothed figure outlined against the colours of luxuriant tapestries with which the walls were hung. He motioned me to a chair, near enough to be within the demands of courtesy to an officer bearing the Emperor's commission, and far enough removed from him to be safe should the visitor turn out to be dangerous. I noticed, too, that an electric bell button was well within reach. "What do you wish with me, Lieutenant? This visit is unusual."

"I am not accustomed to bother about what is usual where my life is concerned," I answered, firmly. "I want an answer to a plain question. Why do you send your bravoes to assassinate me?"

"I have sent no bravoes to assassinate you, Lieutenant. I don't understand you. We don't hire assassins." As though the whole thing were ridiculous.

"Yet your wife recognised this man instantly."

"My wife!" he exclaimed, with a sufficient change to shew how this had touched him.

"Yes. Your wife. She was in my rooms when these men came."

He drew in a deep breath while he looked at me with eyes of hate. I had got right between the joints of his armour of impassivity. It was a cruel thrust; but I had an ugly game to play, and was forced to hit hard.

He seemed to struggle to repress his private feelings and to remain the impassive official. But human nature and his jealousy beat him, and his next question came with a jerk that shewed the effort behind it.

"What was she doing there?" His tone was the essence of harsh bitterness.

"What was she doing there?" I echoed, as if in the greatest astonishment. "Why, what should she be doing but calling with my sister? They are there now, keeping guard over your—assistant."

He turned away for a moment to prevent my seeing in his face the relief which I could hear in his voice as he answered:—

"You are an even bolder man than I thought."

"I don't understand you, of course; but I have need to be bold," I retorted, "with you against me ready to plan my private execution. They're heavy odds. But now, perhaps, you'll answer my question—Why do you do this?"

"There might be many reasons—if it were true," he answered in the same curt tone he had first used.

"One's enough for me, if it's true," I replied, copying his sharp manner.

He stood a minute looking at me in silence, and then sat down.

"I think I've been doing you an injustice, Lieutenant," he said, presently. "I thought when you forced your way into me you might be coming to assassinate me. But I see now you're not such a fool as to try and do anything of that kind when you have left a broad trail behind you that would lead to your certain detection. You are young; with all the weaknesses of youth strongly developed—rash, hotheaded, sometimes tipsy, a fool with women, and when, necessary, a knave too, loose in money matters and unscrupulous, a gambler, a dicer, and a bankrupt in morals, religion, and honour. But you are shrewd—for you've deceived everyone about your sword-skill and your courage—and under the garb of a worthless fellow you have a cool, calculating, and yet dare-devil head that should make your for-

tune. Others are more right about you than I."

"Others?" I asked, interested and amused by this quiet enumeration of the results of the analysis of two very different, but united characters. "Who are the others?"

A faint ghost of what in another man would have been a smile relaxed the grim, hard, straight lips for an instant, in mockery of my attempt to draw him.

"You are not unknown, Lieutenant, as you may find soon; but you are a fool to mix yourself up with the Nihilists."

It was my turn now to be on the defensive.

"That is a charge which a child can make and the wisest man can sometimes fail to rebut," I answered, sharply. "I am not a Nihilist."

He waved his hand as if my repudiation were not worth a serious thought.

"I can make you a career, if you will. If you will act under me. . . ."

"Thank you," I returned, coldly. "I know what you can do. You can put me first on the list for some task which will insure my being served as you meant me to be served to-day. One commission is enough for me, and I prefer the Emperor's."

"You don't know what you say, nor what you refuse."

"All the more reason for not regretting my refusal," I retorted, lightly. "But this does not answer my question—Why do you seek to have me assassinated?"

"Siberia is getting overpopulated," he returned, manifestly angry at my refusal.

"You mean it's cheaper to kill than to exile."

"One must have some regard for its morals, too," he sneered, with a contempt at which my rage took fire.

I looked at him with a light in my eyes which he could read plainly enough.

"You are a coward, M. Tueski," said I, sternly: "because you presume upon the office you hold to say things which without the protection that guards you, you would not dare to let between your teeth."

"It is useless to talk in that strain to me," he said, shortly. "I know you."

"No—by Heaven, you don't—yet. But I'll let you know something of me now. Men say you know no fear; that your loves, desires, emotions, are all dead—all, save ambition. I'll test that. This plot you have laid against my life is your own private revenge for some fancied wrong. You have sought to carry it out even at the very moment when you had had a hint to guard me. It was cunningly laid, and nearly succeeded; and then you would have set the blame down at Devinsky's door."

He listened without making a sign: quite impassively. But the mere fact that he did listen shewed me I was striking the right note, and further that he wished to see what I meant to do.

"Go on," he said, contemptuously, when I paused.

"I can prove this: aye, and I will prove it, even if I go to the Emperor himself: and prove it —by your own wife." He could not wholly conceal the effect of this. He knew the strength of the threat.

"More than that," I cried then, quickening my speech and shewing much more passion. "You know what the world says about me and your wife. You shewed me you knew it, when I told you just

now that she was in my rooms when your men came to try and take my life. You have dared to smirch my honour in regard to women: and you have lied. So far as your wife is concerned, there has never been a thought of mine toward her tainted with dishonour. So far as I am concerned she is virgin pure. But, by God! beware how you taunt me. It lies with you to say whether I shall change; and if you drive me to it, I'll...."

I left the terrible sentence unfinished; and the change in the man's manner shewed me how he was inwardly shrinking and wincing at my desperate words.

"Go on. What do you want?" He spoke after a great effort and strove to keep his voice at the dead level of official lifelessness. But the man was an inward fire of rage and jealousy.

"This duel is not my seeking, but yours, M. Tueski," I continued. "And for my part I would as soon have a truce. But if we are to fight on, I will use every weapon I can lay my hand on,—and use them desperately. You can prove the truth of what I say. Send round someone to my rooms and fetch away the scoundrel who is there. My sister will let him go. Your wife, her friend, is staying with her to help in case of need. And whatever else I may be, at least I should not give my mistress to my sister for a friend."

"You are the devil!" The words forced themselves through his teeth at this word. I used it deliberately: and it was the shrewdest thing I could have done. He left the room without another word, going through a door behind him; and, calling to someone, he whispered some instructions.

"You have sent? You are right," I said, when he returned. "And now, call off these bloodhounds

of yours; and so long as you play fair with me, my sister and your wife can be friends. And no longer. One other condition. Give me two police permits to cross the frontier on special business—one for me and one for my sister. You may not be sorry if I decide to take a holiday."

"I cannot give them, and you cannot leave," he answered.

"Write me the permits. I'll see about using them."

"No; I cannot write them. If I did, they would be cancelled to-morrow by the Ministry of the Interior."

"Why?"

"The fact is what I say. You cannot leave Russia."

"I care nothing for that. Write them—or we resume this duel, M. Tueski."

He was a changed man. He was so accustomed to exact implicit obedience to his will, and to ride roughshod over everyone about him, that now being beaten, his collapse was utter and complete. He was absolutely overcome by the pressure I could threaten and he thought I was blackguard enough to apply.

For once at least my old black character did me a good turn. He acted like a weak child now, entirely subjected by my will. He wrote the permits as I directed.

As he was writing it occurred to me there must be some influence behind the scenes which told with him. Else, why did he not forthwith write out the order for my imprisonment? He had done it hundreds of times before in the case of men infinitely more influential than myself. His signature would open the door of any prison in Russia. It

suggested itself that it was this reason which was at the bottom of the attempt to get me killed. He dared not follow out his own desire.

"One thing puzzles me," I said, coolly, as I took the permits. "Why haven't you, instead of writing these, written an order packing me off to gaol? What is this power behind you?"

"I may live in hope, perhaps," he returned. "Your sword and your shrewdness may carry you far: and some day as far as the gaol you speak of. I shan't fail to write it when the time comes."

I left him with that.

As I left the house a man pressed close to me, and I turned to see what he wanted. There was no one else about.

"Is it done?" he whispered.

I looked at him keenly; but I had never seen him before, I thought.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The night in the riverside wharf," he whispered back.

He was a Nihilist; here right in the very eye of the police web.

"The way is laid," I answered, equivocally, as I hurried away.

I had actually forgotten in my eagerness all about my charge to kill the man with whom I had been closeted in conference.

But I saw instantly that the Nihilist would probably hold it for an act of treachery that I had been in Tueski's house and yet had let him live.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLGA IN A NEW LIGHT.

I WALKED back to my rooms as I wished to cool my head and think. The interview with Christian Tueski had excited me, and what was of more importance, had kindled a hope that after all I might be able to escape the tremendous difficulties that encompassed me.

One thing in particular pleased me, for it was a double-edged knife loosening two sets of the complications. It was the promise I had given to the man to respect his wife so long as he kept faith with me. This gave me power over him, and what was of infinitely greater value to me personally, it was a shrewd defence against the wife also.

I smiled as I thought of the ingenuity of this; but I little thought what would be the actual result. It seemed then the shrewdest and cleverest, as well as the most daring thing I had done; but in the end the consequences were such as might properly have followed an act of the grossest stupidity and villainy possible. For the moment it pleased me, however, and I was in truth finding the keenest pleasure in this parrying of the thrusts which the fates were making at me.

There was a problem I could not solve, however,

in the question of the power which seemed to be behind the Chief of the Police; the power which made him apparently afraid to strike me openly though so willing to trip me secretly. I could not imagine what it could be, nor whence it could come.

When I reached my rooms my sister and Paula Tueski were waiting for me in the greatest anxiety; and both were overjoyed to see me safe and apparently in high spirits. The police agents had been for the fellow I had left under lock and key; and Olga had taken care to carry out my instructions to the letter. Her quick instincts had warned her, and she had made a parade of almost affectionate friendship for the other woman during the time the men had been present.

After I arrived she could scarcely take her eyes off me, and I saw them glistening as with tears.

"I will take you home, directly," I said, carelessly, as a brother might speak. "But I have something to say first to Madame Tueski; so you must wait for a few minutes."

A look of reproach nearly found expression in hasty words, but remembering herself she said hastily, acting the part to the life:—

"Oh, you're always so mysterious, Alexis. I've no patience with you."

Then I led the other into my second sitting-room and told her much of what had passed: and when I came to that part of the interview that immediately concerned herself, she was very bitter and angry.

"You think I am a pawn to be moved where you like in your game; of no account, and the meanest thing on the board. You and he are both alike in that—but wait. Your life is mine, Alexis. I have told you."

"But you must surely see that the first consideration

must be all our lives—to say nothing of our safety," I answered, rather roughly, I fear, and very unsympathetically. Her heroics rasped me. "What the deuce is the good of your loving me if your husband shuts me up in a dungeon, or sends me dancing to Siberia, or causes a dagger to let out my life blood?"

"You mean to keep the word you gave him?"

"Certainly, so long as he keeps his."

She fixed her large lustrous eyes on me and let them rest on me during a long pause of silence.

"You and he together will drive me to some desperate deed," she said, at length, very slowly. "Then perhaps you will learn what a love like mine will dare for your sake. I cannot and will not bear this separation."

She wearied me with these protests, but I said nothing and went on to question her as to whether there was any power behind her husband influencing him in regard to me. She knew nothing, but admitted that she had her suspicions.

I told her next that while he was trying to assassinate me, she might find the tables turned on him, as there was a Nihilist plot on foot to assassinate him. She paid little heed to it at first, saying that there had been many such schemes formed, all of which had proved abortive, because he was most carefully and continuously guarded. A moment later, however, her manner changed a little, and she questioned me somewhat closely concerning the matter.

"They don't choose their agents shrewdly in these things," she said, "and we hear too soon of their designs. They should choose a man like you, Alexis." She seemed to speak with a hidden meaning, and I was doubtful whether she knew anything; but I kept my doubts to myself.

"If they had done that, I had a rare chance to-night," I answered.

"A bold man or a reckless woman makes the chance," she retorted in the same manner. "I am going, Alexis:" she added, and then forced on me caresses which were vastly repulsive. But I could not reveal my true feelings until I had at any rate placed Olga in safety. My indifference and coldness were apparent to the woman, and she upbraided me with a burst of angry passion, till I had to patch up a sort of peace.

We went back to Olga and soon afterwards drove away, Olga and I setting the other down at her door.

So long as Madame Tueski was with us, Olga maintained the part of the impatient sister; but as soon as we were alone her manner changed altogether.

"I had to send for you this evening," I said, "And you saved me from a situation of great difficulty and hazard by coming so promptly. I thank you for having done so."

No reply. I glanced at her in the gloomy light in the cab and saw the profile set hard and immobile, with the lips pressed closely together.

"Storm signals out," thought I.

"I was saying I thanked you. You acted with rare discretion and did me a great service."

Not a word.

"You were not so silent just now." I hazarded.

"I was acting—with discretion." She repeated my word with that relish and enjoyment which a well regulated mind always feels about a telling sarcasm.

"And what sort of discretion is this?" I retorted, laughing.

She was silent again.

"I have a good deal to tell you in explanation."

"I have no wish to hear anything, thank you," she interposed. "I can trust your discretion"—much emphasis again on the word—"as completely as you can mine. I am glad to have been of *use* to you and Madame Tueski." She threw the word "use" at me as if it had been a bomb to be exploded in my face.

"What have I done that's wrong? I'm very sorry," I said.

"I beg you not to apologise. You never used to, and as you appear to be slipping back into your old habits it would be out of character to apologise —to me. I am only to be used."

"I don't a bit understand you."

There was a moment's silence, and then she could contain her indignation no longer and burst out with the cause of it.

"Why didn't you send me home immediately you returned? You could surely have given me your servant as an escort. Then you would have spared me the shame and humiliation of waiting during your private interchange of confidences with that woman."

At that instant we stopped at her house.

"Please not to come in to-night," she said. "I have had to keep certain things waiting here while I was being of *use* to you, and was sitting alone in your rooms; and I have now very much to do."

"I am sorry to trouble you; but I am coming in. This thing must be cleared up at once;" and I followed my very angry sister into the house.

She led the way to a small drawing-room and turning to me said coldly:—

"I am ready to hear what you wish to say."

I had been thinking quickly during the interval, and now changed my point of attack.

"I had a very serious thing to say. You gave me your promise...."

"I would rather you would not remind me of any promises," she interrupted. This was said deliberately; but then she broke through her cold formality, and with a little stamp of her foot finished angrily:—"I won't keep them. I won't be reminded of them. Things are altered—altogether altered."

"What I was going to say is..." I began, when she broke in again.

"I won't hear it. I don't want to hear any more. I wish you'd go away."

"You must hear me," I said quietly, but with some authority in my tone.

"'Must!' I don't understand you."

"Must—for your own safety."

"Thank you. I can protect myself. Your other cares and responsibilities have a prior claim on you. Will you please leave me now?"

"No, I can't go, until I've told you...."

"I will not listen! Didn't I tell you?" She was vehemence itself.

I shrugged my shoulders in despair.

"This morning..." I began; but the moment I opened my lips she broke out again with her vehement interruptions.

"Ah, things were different this morning. I had not then been insulted. Do you forget I am a Russian; and think you can treat me as you will—keep me waiting while—bah! it is unbearable. Will you go away? Is there no sense of manliness in you that will make you leave me? Must I call for assistance? I will do that if you do not leave me. You can write what you have to say. But, please, spare me the pain of seeing you again."

Her words cut me to the quick; but they roused me also.

"You had better call for assistance," I answered firmly. Then I crossed to the door, locked it, and put the key in my pocket. "I will spare you the pain of another interview; but now that I am here, I decline to go until I have explained."

"You cannot explain," she burst in. The word seemed to madden her.

"Cannot explain what?"

"That woman's kisses!"

The words appeared to leap from her lips involuntarily; and she repented them as soon as uttered; and drawing herself up she tried to appear cold and stolid. But this attempt failed completely; and in her anger at the thought behind the words and with herself for having given it utterance, she stood looking at me, her bosom heaving and tossing with agitation and her face and eyes aglow with an emotion, which with a strange delight, I saw was jealousy.

There came a long pause, during which I recalled her manner and the way she had played with my words, during one of our rides when we had spoken of Devinsky's proposal to make her his wife.

I have always been slow to read women's hearts and have generally read them wrong; but I began to study this with a sense of new and peculiar pleasure.

She was getting very dear to me for a sister.

If my guess was right, my conduct with that infernal women, Paula Tueski, must have been gall and wormwood to Olga.

How should I have relished it had the position been reversed, and Devinsky been in Paula Tueski's place?

These thoughts which flashed across me in rapid

succession produced a peculiar frame of mind. I had stood a minute in silence, not looking at her, and when I raised my eyes again I was conscious of sensations toward her, that were altogether different from anything I had felt before. She had become more beautiful than ever in my eyes; I, more eagerly anxious to please and appease; while at bottom there was a dormant fear that I might be mistaken in my new reading of her actions, in which was mixed up another fear, not nearly so strong, that her anger on account of Paula Tueski might really end in our being separated.

My first act shewed the change in me.

I ceased to feel the freedom with which I had hitherto acted the part of brother, and I immediately threw open the door and stood aside that she might go out if she wished. Then I said:—

"Perhaps you are right. My conduct may be inexcusable even to save your life."

Whether there was anything in my manner that touched her—I was conscious of speaking with much less confidence than usual; or whether it was the act of unfastening the door: or whether, again, some subtle influence had set her thoughts moving in parallel columns to mine, I do not know. But her own manner changed quite as suddenly as mine; and when she caught my eyes on her, she flushed and paled with effects that made her radiantly beautiful to me.

She said not a word; and finding this, I continued:—

"I am sorry a cloud has come between us at the last, and through something that was not less hateful to me because forced by the needs of the case. We have been such friends; but...." here

I handed her the permit—"you must use this at once."

She took it and read it slowly in silence, and then asked:—

"How did you get this?"

"Myself, personally, from the Chief of the Police."

"Why did you run the mad risk of going to him yourself?"

"There was no risk—not so much in going to him as in keeping away from him. He had tried to have me murdered, and I went to find out the reason."

"I told you I would not leave."

"Unless—and the condition now applies—it was necessary for my safety."

"And you?" The light of fear was in her eyes as she asked this.

"As soon as you are across the frontier I shall make a dash for my liberty also. I can't go before, because my absence would certainly bring you under suspicion."

She looked at me again very intently, her head bent slightly forward and her lips parted with the strain of a new thought; while suspicion of my motive chased the fear for my safety from her face.

"Is this to get me out of the way? I won't go!"

"Olga!"

All my honour for myself and my love for her were in that note of reproach, and they appeared to waken an echo; for then this most strange girl threw herself down on to a couch and burying her face in her hands sobbed passionately.

I turned away from the sight of her emotion—the more painful because of the strong self-reserve and force of character she had always shewn—and paced up and down the room. I forced back my own feelings and the desire to tell her what those

feelings were. To do that would be worse than madness. Till we were out of Russia, we were brother and sister and the bar between us was heavier than we could hope to move.

When the storm of her sobs ceased, she remained for some minutes quite still: and I would not break the silence, knowing she was fighting her way back to self-possession.

Presently, she got up and came to me, holding out her hand.

"I will go, Alexis—we are still firm friends?" —with a little smile of wistful interrogation. "Can you forgive my temper? I was mad for the moment, I think. But I trust you. I do indeed, absolutely. I know you had no thought of insulting me. I know that. I couldn't think so meanly of you. It's hard to leave—Russia—and—and everything. And you, too—at this time. Must I really go?" A half-beseeching glance into my eyes and a pause for the answer I could not give. "Very well. I know what your silence means. Come to-morrow morning—and say"—she stopped again and bit her trembling lips to steady them as she framed the word—"and say—goodbye to me. And now, please, let me go—brother and truest friend."

She wrung my hand, and then before I could prevent her or even guess her intention, she pressed her lips to it and, with the tears again in her eyes, she went quickly away, leaving me to stare after her like a helpless fool, longing to call her back and tell her everything, and yet afraid.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DEED WHICH RANG THROUGH RUSSIA.

It was not destined that Olga should leave Russia yet.

A terrible event happened within the next few hours, the report of which rang through Russia like a clap of thunder, convulsing the whole nation, and shaking for the moment the entire social fabric to its lowest foundations. And one of its smaller consequences was to ruin my plans and expose me to infinite personal peril.

Olga was to start at noon, and I proposed to see her an hour before then, for what I knew would be a very trying ordeal. But I was at that hour in the midst of a very different kind of interview.

Outside official circles I was one of the first men to learn the news. Just before ten o'clock a messenger came with a request for me to go at once to the chief Police Bureau. I started in the full conviction that for some cause Tueski had changed his mind and meant to arrest me. I was of course helpless: and could do no more than scribble a hasty line to Olga telling her of my appointment, asking her not to wait for me, and bidding her good-bye. But I did not send it. The police agent said with great politeness he would

prefer my not doing anything then: I could send the note equally well from the Bureau. I knew what that meant, and yielded.

The moment I arrived at the office I could see that some event of altogether unusual importance and gravity had occurred. The air was laden with the suggestion of excitement. There was an absence of that orderly, business-like routine always characteristic of Russian public offices. The police agents were present in exceptionally large numbers; hurrying through the corridors, thronging the rooms, and standing in groups engaged in animated discussion.

I was kept waiting some time, perhaps half an hour, before a word was spoken to me by anyone in authority; and then I was ushered into the presence of a man I did not know.

"I am sorry to trouble you, Lieutenant Petrovitch, but there are one or two questions you can answer —and I need not say that as a Russian officer, bearing the Emperor's commission, we shall look to you to reply very fully."

I bowed. It was a fit preface to a conversation which should end as such things generally did. But at any rate I should learn what they intended to do with me. Before he spoke again I asked that the letter I had written to Olga might be sent; but he put the question aside, with a curt reply that it could wait until the Emperor's business was finished; and again I bowed in acquiescence. I could do nothing.

"Please to tell me exactly what passed between you and M. Tueski yesterday," he said. "And particularly how you obtained the permits for yourself and sister. I invite you to be particularly frank."

The question startled me. I couldn't understand it.

"Your question surprises me," I replied, to gain a little time to think. "M. Tueski himself knows, and can surely tell you everything."

"I ask my questions in the name of the Emperor, sir," returned my examiner, sternly.

"M. Tueski had done me the honour of trying to have me murdered, and I went to see him to demand the reason. He did not deny it. I persuaded him in the end to abandon his private malice and prevailed upon him to give me the permits for myself and my sister to leave Russia for a while. When he had given them to me I left him."

"Where are they?"

"Here is one. The other is with my sister, who leaves Moscow at midday."

"You may stop her attempting to leave. It will be useless. What else passed?" And he then plunged into a close cross-examination of me, the real object of which I could not guess, unless it meant that Tueski had in some way got into a mess for letting me have the permits. I answered all the questions as fully as possible, taking care only to avoid mentioning Paula Tueski's name in connection with the compact with her husband.

To my surprise I seemed to satisfy the man for the time. When he had about turned me inside out, he sat for some minutes looking over my answers and comparing them with some of his notes: after which he remained thinking closely.

"What did you do after leaving M. Tueski?"

"I went straight to my rooms to my sister and Madame Tueski; together we drove Madame Tueski to her house; I then went home with my sister, remained there about an hour, or perhaps less; and went home and to bed."

"You have told me all you know, Lieutenant?"

"You can ask M. Tueski," I returned.

He fixed his eyes steadily on me while I could have counted twenty, and then said slowly and with deep emphasis:—

"M. Tueski is dead."

"Dead!" I repeated in the profoundest surprise.

"Murdered. Found this morning in the lower part of his own house with a dagger thrust through his heart."

"Murdered?" I could scarcely believe my ears.

"Yes. 'For Freedom's sake'," said the man with a curl of the lip. "At least, so a message on the dagger said. Now you can understand the significance of my questions."

I understood it all well enough: far better than the man himself even imagined; and I was completely beaten as to what the inner meaning of this most terrible event could be.

One of my first reflections was that if any of the suspicions of my Nihilism, which the dead man entertained, were chronicled anywhere, my arrest and that of Olga would certainly follow; and we should both be doomed.

"I can scarcely realise it," I said. "It is horrible!"

"So these wretches will find," returned my interlocutor. "These carrion! But now, in view of this—and I have told you because of the candid manner in which you have answered my questions—is there anything you noticed in your visit yesterday to help us."

Clearly, he did not suspect me; and no records had been found yet.

"No. The place seemed alive with inmates—like a rabbit warren. Enough to have held it against a regiment. Good God, what villains!" I cried in

horror. Mine was genuine feeling enough, for some of the terrible effects to myself were fast crowding into my thoughts. I recalled my encounter with my Nihilist comrade on the very threshold of the house.

"Of course, those permits will be withdrawn now, Lieutenant," said the official as he dismissed me. But his manner was much less severe and curt than at the outset. "As a matter of fact they ought never to have been granted, though I cannot explain why just now. But under the circumstances you will probably feel personally unwilling to leave Russia at such a juncture."

"I should feel myself a traitor," said I, grandiloquently; and in fact I did feel very much like one as I left him, rejoicing that I still breathed the fresh air of heaven instead of the fœtid atmosphere of a gaol.

One thing was certain now—neither Olga nor I could hope to escape yet. Any attempt would be fatal. The murder of such a man would mean that the lurid search light of suspicion would fall in all directions, on the guilty and guiltless alike. The liberty certainly, and probably the life, of every suspected Nihilist in Moscow at the moment were at stake: and the slightest trip or false step on our part would amount to a direct invitation to ruin.

As I walked back sadly and thoughtfully to my rooms, I had abundant proofs of the terrible effects of the assassination. The police agents were everywhere, watching, raiding, arresting; and in my short walk I met more than one gloomy party of them, each with its one or two prisoners in their midst, hurrying on foot or in hired carriages to the police stations.

It is not my business, however, to describe here the scenes that followed the most daring, most

secret, most thrilling, and save one, most terrible assassination that ever convulsed Russia. The murder of the Czar stirred the surface of the world more, because it had more of the pageantry of crime about it; but the death of the Chief of the Secret Police caused a much deeper sense of insecurity, and spread a far greater dread of the secret power of Nihilism.

Who had done it? To me it was an inscrutable mystery; unless it had been the man I had seen near the house. But what I had to consider was not whose hand had driven the dagger home, but rather what the effects would be to me and to her for whose safety I now felt more fears and concern than I had felt for myself in all my life.

One incident in the interview I had just had impressed me greatly: the reference which the official had dropped as to the power behind Tueski in dealing with me. My questioner had seemed to know about it that morning: and all this perplexed me.

As soon as I reached my rooms I had to hurry off to the barracks in response to an urgent summons; and I joined readily in the excited conversation of my comrades about this latest Nihilist stroke. The news was only beginning to leak out, and it assumed the wildest shapes; nor did I feel at liberty to reduce the rumours to facts.

Before the morning's work was over orders came that the troops were to be paraded for duty in the streets: and we were told off for patrol work in different parts of the city to protect the railway stations, and other public buildings. All that day we were kept on duty; and as other troops came pouring in from other centres the whole place seemed under arms like a beleaguered town.

All day and all night the raids and surprise visits by the police were in progress, and hundreds, if not

thousands of men and women must have been arrested, until the gaols were crowded to suffocation point, and every spot where prisoners could be packed was crammed and choked with suspects.

The cries and curses of men and the shrieks of women made the air stifling.

We were not relieved until late at night, having been all day without food; and even then we were kept in the barracks in readiness for any disturbance.

The next day's programme was much the same; and I fretted at not being able to either see or send to Olga. Knowing of her brother's Nihilism she would surely think I had been arrested; while I on my side was afraid for her.

In the afternoon of the third day we got leave from duty and from barracks for a few hours; and I went straight off to Olga. Meanwhile not a hint had been obtained as to the identity of the assassin.

I found Olga white and wan and ill on my account; and when we met I was on my side almost too moved for speech. At first I could do no more than glance into her eyes as we clasped each the other's hand.

"You are looking frightfully ill, Olga," I said at length.

She returned my look without a word and then her brow contracted, she breathed deeply as if in pain, and turning away wrung her hands with a gesture of despair.

"What is the matter? What has happened to you? There must be something . . ." I stopped, or rather the sight of the white face all drawn and quivering with pain stopped me.

"Oh, it is too horrible, too awful! God have mercy on us! God have mercy on us!"

Bad as things were so far as I knew them, this

dejection seemed disproportionate and excessive. She was like a mad woman distraught with fear or grief; and she waved her hands about as if wrestling with emotions she could not conquer.

"Oh, it can't be true; it can't be," she moaned; and then came suddenly to me, turned my face to the light holding it between her white trembling hands, and gazed at me with a look of mingled anguish, fear, doubt, wildness, and—love; her lips parted and her bosom rising and falling as if with the strain of her passionate feelings.

When her scrutiny was over, her hands seemed to slip down and she fell on her knees close to me and I heard her muttering prayers with vehement fervour.

"What does this mean, Olga?" I asked gently, bending down and laying my hand on her shoulder. She looked round and up at my touch, and tried to smile. Then she rose and standing opposite to me, put her hands on my two shoulders so that her face was close beneath mine. And all the time she was muttering prayers. Then, in a voice all broken and tremulous, she said:—

"Brother, swear as you believe there is a God in Heaven, you will answer truly what I ask."

"I will. I swear it," I answered, wishing to quiet her.

"Did you really do this?"

"Do what?" I asked, not understanding.

"Kill Christian Tueski?"

"Did I kill him? No, child, certainly not." I spoke in the greatest astonishment.

"Oaths may bind you to secrecy, I know. But for God's sake, tell me the truth—the truth. You can tell me. I am...." I felt her shudder.

"Is it this which has been driving you distracted?

There is no cause. I know no more by whose hand that man came by his death than a babe unborn."

"Say that again, Alexis. Say it again. It is the sweetest music I have heard in all my life."

I repeated the assurance, and a smile of genuine relief broke out over her face. Next she cried and laughed and cried again, and then sat down as if completely overcome by the rush of relief from a too heavy strain.

"What does all this mean?" I asked quietly, after a while. "Try and tell me."

"I have been like a mad thing for two days. Let me wait awhile. I will tell you presently. Oh, thank God, thank God for what you have said. It drove me mad to think you should have been driven to this by me; and that perhaps for my sake you might have been urged to do such a horrible thing. Waking and sleeping alike I have thought of nothing but of your suffering torture and death. And all through me—through me." She covered her face in horror at the remembrance of her thoughts: but a moment later took away her hands to smile at me.

"You have not told me yet what made you think anything of the sort."

"I will tell you. As soon as I heard the news, I knew of course that as I had been mixed up in some old Nihilist troubles, it would be hopeless for me to think of leaving Moscow; and when the police agent came I let him understand that I had given up all thought of travelling yet. Then I was all anxiety for news of you, and in the afternoon I went to your rooms. I found the door shut and could hear nothing. Then I began to fear for you. I am only a woman."

She stopped and smiled to me before resuming. Then with a shudder she continued:—

"Then a most strange thing happened, Borlas came to me just at dusk; and he looked so strange that at first I thought he had been drinking. Saying he had a message from you he waited until I had sent the servant away.

"'What is it?' I asked.

"For answer he gave me a sign that made my heart sink. I knew it too well, and I looked at him with the keenest scrutiny. Had the Nihilists put a spy on you even in your own servant? Then I saw—that it was not Borlas, but a man so cleverly made up to resemble him that I had been at first deceived.

"'What do you want here?' I asked, now with every nerve in my body at full tension.

"'Do you know?' and the light in his eyes seemed to flash into mine,

"'Do I know what?' I could see there was something behind all this.

"He bent close to me, though we were of course alone, and spoke his reply in a fierce whisper.

"'Tell your brother that after this proof our hearts beat but for him; our plans shall all wait on him; every man of us will go to his death silently and cheerfully at his mere bidding. He leads, we follow. He has nobly kept his pledge for the cause of God and Freedom.'

"As I heard this my heart seemed to stop in pain. I had to hold to the table to save myself from falling."

"'Do you mean,' I gasped, 'that Alexis has murdered....'

"'Silence, sister,' replied the man sternly. 'That is no word for you to utter or for me to hear.

Your brother is as true a friend as Russian Liberty ever had; and I thank my God that I have ever been allowed to even touch the hand that has dealt this vigorous blow and done this noble and righteous act.'

"'I will tell him,' I said.

"'Tell him also, he need have no fear. Not a man who was at the meeting is in the city now, save me; and not a single soul of the thousands these hell dogs of tyranny can seize knows anything—save only me. And I would to the Almighty God they would take me and torture me and tear my flesh off bit by bit with their cursed red-hot pincers that I might use my last breath and my latest effort to taunt them that I know the hero who has done it, and die with my knowledge a secret.'

"Then this terrible man, you may not know his name, but I know him, left me, telling me it was 'a glorious day for Russia, and that God would smile for ever upon you for this deed.' And I—I was plunged into a maelstrom of agonising fears, racking doubts, and poisoned thoughts about you and what I had led you to do."

What Olga said had also immense importance and significance for me. It shewed me a startling view of my situation. It was clear the Nihilists attributed the murder to me, and what effect that would have upon us I was at a loss even to conjecture.

"The man's blood is not on my hands, Olga; but I cannot be surprised at the mistake. I will tell you everything;" and I told her then all that had passed.

"Who can have done it then?" she asked, when I finished.

"It is as complete a mystery to me as to the

police. The man I saw near the house might have done it; but then I suppose it must have been the same man who came to you: and in that case he certainly wouldn't have set it down to me. I am beaten. But I am likely to find the wrongful inheritance embarrassing. I must be more cautious than ever to draw down no word of suspicion upon either of us. We must both be scrupulously careful. And thus it will be impossible for you to think of getting away."

"It's a leaden sky that has no silver streak," replied Olga. "And that impossibility is my streak."

I could not but understand this, and even while my judgment condemned her, my heart was warmed by her words. But my judgment spoke.

"If you were away my anxieties would be all but ended."

"If I were away my anxieties would be all but unendurable," she retorted, following my words and smiling. It was not possible to hear this with anything but delight; but I had my feelings too well under control now to let them be seen easily.

"That may be," I said. "But my first and chief effort will be to get you safe across the frontier."

She made no answer: but her manner told me she would not consent to go until it had become a rank impossibility for her to stay. Presently she said with much feeling:—

"If I had been away and the news had come that you had done the thing these men assert, how do you think I could have borne it? I should have either come rushing back here or have died of remorse and fear and anxiety on your account. It was through me you commenced all this."

"But of my own choice that I continued," I

replied. "And believe me, if all were to come over again I should act in just the same way. I have never had such a glorious time before; and all I want now is to see you safe."

Olga paused to look at me steadily.

"You've never told me all the reason why you were so ready to take all these desperate risks. Will you tell me now?"

"I had made a mess of things generally, as I told you before," I answered, with a smile and a slight flush at the reminiscences thus disturbed by her question.

"Was there a woman in it?" Her eyes were fixed on me as she put the question.

"There's a woman in most things," I answered, equivocally.

"Yes, I suppose so." She turned away and looked down, and asked next:—

"Were you very fond of her, Alexis?"

"Judging by the little ripple that remains on the surface now that she's gone out of my life, no: judging by the splash the stone made at first, yes. But she's gone."

"Yet the waters of the pool may be left permanently clouded. I am sorry for you, Alexis: and if you were really my brother, I would try and help you two together."

"That's not altogether a very proper thing to say." I spoke lightly, and she looked up to question me. "Her husband might not thank you, I mean: though I'm not quite sure about that;" and then having told her so much, I told her the story of my last meeting with Sir Philip Cargill and Edith. But she did not take it as I wished.

"You must have loved her if you meant to kill her," she said.

"And ceased then, if I left her to live a miserable life."

"I should like to see the woman you have ceased to love," she said, woman-like in curiosity—and something else.

"You may do that yet, if only Alexis Petrovitch can make a safe way for his sister out of Russia;" and then I added, pausing and looking at her with a meaning in my eyes which I wished her to understand though I dared not put it in plain words:—"But we shall not be brother and sister then."

She glanced up hurriedly, her face aglow with a sudden rush of thought—pleasurable thought too—and then looked down again and smiled.

"In that case how should we two be together?" she asked.

"Do you mean that such a time as this will be likely to render us ready to part?"

To that her only answer was another glance and a deeper blush. Then I made an effort and recovered myself on the very verge.

"But while we are here, we are brother and sister, Olga;" and feeling that if I wished to keep other things unsaid I had better go away, I left her.

CHAPTER XV.

A SHE DEVIL.

THE more I contemplated the position the less I liked it, and the more urgent appeared the reasons for hurrying Olga out of the country.

All my care was for her. Before this new feeling of mine for her had forced itself upon me, the situation had been really a game of wits with my life as the stake; but now Olga's life, or at least her liberty, was also at stake. It was there the crisis pinched me till I winced and writhed under it. Fear had got hold of me at last and I tugged restlessly at the chain.

That night and the next day, the day of Christian Tueski's funeral, were occupied with heavy duties, because the authorities, both military and civil, persisted in believing there was danger of an émeute. I could have counselled them differently if I had dared to open my lips. At least I thought I could; although I did not then hold the key to the mystery.

I got it from Paula Tueski.

In the afternoon of the day but one after the funeral, I had a brief note asking me to call on her.

I went and found her surrounded by all the signs and trappings of the deepest mourning. She received me very gravely, and while there was anyone in

the room, she played the part of the sorrowing, disconsolate widow: but the instant we were alone she shewed a most indecent and revolting haste to let me know her mind.

"We are alone, now, Alexis," she said.

"I have called as you asked and because I wished to express my sympathy...."

"Psh! Don't let us be hypocrites, you and I," she exclaimed, half angrily, and with great energy. "I do not pretend to you that I am sorry to be free, and don't you pretend to me either."

I didn't answer, and my silence irritated her.

"Would you have me weep, tear my hair, put ashes on my head and grovel in the dust because the biggest villain and coward and beast that ever lived in human shape is dead? I hated him living; shall I love him dead?"

"At least the dead are dead, and to revile them is mere empty brutality," said I, somewhat harshly.

"Then I like empty brutality if it relieves my feelings. God! I have been a hypocrite long enough. I should hate myself if I did not speak the truth to you."

I shrugged my shoulders. I had no answer.

"Why didn't you send a wreath of pure white flowers as an emblem of your regard? Why not a message to swell the millions of lies that men have uttered in their squalid fear of offending the Government by silence? Ugh! It makes me sick when I think of it all;" and she shuddered as if in disgust. "He was a devil, and I won't call him by any softer name merely because his power to harm is gone. Didn't he try to murder you? And wasn't it jealousy? Ah, we have much to be thankful to the Nihilists for, you and I." There was an indescribable suggestion of a hidden meaning about this.

I hated the woman.

"You have no clue yet, I suppose?"

"Yes, I have a clue," she replied, with a laugh that sounded like a threat. "I can put my hand on the murderer when I will—and I will, if he proves a traitor."

"You are in a dramatic mood," I answered. "Who is the man? Why not denounce him? Surely this act is what you must call treachery."

"There was a Nihilist plot to kill the man," she said, speaking with contemptuous flippancy of accent of the dead.

"Yes, I told you that myself," I replied.

"It was because of that he died."

"So everybody thinks."

"And how do you account for it?" she asked, looking at me keenly.

"I have no more idea than yourself."

She laughed; and a hard forced laugh it was. Then she got up from her chair and walked twice up and down the room in dead silence. She stopped in front of me and stared down into my eyes.

"Alexis, do you really love me?"

The question was an exceedingly unpleasant one and filled me with disgust.

"Surely this is no time for us to speak of such things," I said.

"Do you love me, Alexis," she repeated.

"I will not answer now," I said, rising.

"Why not? Why should we not speak of love now—now, aye, and always? Or is your passion so poor and sickly a thing that a puff from the wind of propriety kills it? Not speak of such things! I would plight my love to you across the very body of the dead man!" She spoke with passionate vehemence. "Remember what I told you—your

life is mine. You cannot escape me. Now, tell me, do you love me?"

"I have given my answer, and if you ask that question again to-day I will not stop in the room," I said angrily: the woman's persistency increasing my disgust.

She laughed—a half hysterical laugh of anger.

"So you will not stop in the room and will never, I suppose, return. Be careful," she cried, with one of her quick passionate changes. "Or I will send you away and never let you come back except begging for mercy on your knees for yourself and your sister." She turned away and stood by the window; and I could see by her movements that she was struggling with violent emotions.

She came back at length, the face paler and the voice not so steady.

"I will ask you if you love me," she said. "And I dare you to go away from the room."

I accepted the challenge without an instant's hesitation.

"I am going. I will see you when you are cooler," and I went to the door.

With a quick rush she prevented my opening it, and putting her back to it stared at me in the most violent passion, which thickened her voice as she spoke.

"You shall go directly—if you wish to. You will make me hate you, one day, Alexis, and then —I will kill you."

"It will be far better for me to come some other time," I said, anxious to leave.

"You will have plenty of opportunities, never fear," she retorted, with a very angry sneering laugh. "And what is more, you will not dare not to use them. Listen—it is love for you drives me

to this—a love that you can never escape now, Alexis, even if you had the will."

She paused; but I said nothing. I had nothing to say. All I wished was to get away.

"Do you think there is anything I would not do for your love, Alexis? I have told you there is nothing—told you so scores of times. Now, I have proved it. Do you hear—proved it. I proved it a few nights ago when this hand plunged the dagger hilt deep into my husband's heart—for your sake."

I started back and looked at the woman in horror.

"Yes, this hand"—she held it out—"so white, smooth, deft, and shapely. Don't start from it. There is no blood shewing on it now. And never was. I know how to thrust a dagger home too cleverly to leave a trace of either blood or guilt on me. In all this Moscow of ours the one person who is deemed above all others guiltless—is myself. Had it been in reality the Nihilist deadly secret stroke that men deem it, it could not have been more cunningly contrived, more secretly planned, more fatally executed. Yet the motive was not hate of a Government, but love for a man. For you, Alexis: you and you only. Now do you wish to go?"

She moved away from the door; but I made no attempt to go. The horror of her story had fascinated me.

"There was a tinge of hate in it, too, mark you, and more than a tinge. But I'll tell you all. You ought to know, since you were in reality the cause of all. You gave me the motive, suggested the occasion, and provoked that which led to it. More than that, too, you can by a single word from me be made to bear the brunt. Now, will you go?"

Was the woman mad that she spoke in this way?

If so, there was a devilish method in her madness, as the story she told quickly shewed me.

"I knew the day would come when either I should kill him or he would kill me; for he was a devil. Well, you roused all that was most evil, vicious, and fiendish in him in that interview; and when I saw him he was like a man bereft of his wits. Every form of reproach he could heap on me in cold, contemptuous, galling sneers he uttered with all the calculated aggravation that could make a taunt unbearable. He threatened me in every tone of menace: and when I answered, turned suddenly furious and struck me violent blows and vowed to kill me. It was then I recalled your words, that there was a Nihilist plot against his life; and I vowed I would be the means of carrying it out; for I knew I could easily put suspicion away from me. I lured him cunningly to that part of the house where he was found, plunged the dagger into his breast, put into his pocket the forged warning of a Nihilist attack, opened the house at a point where a man could have entered, fastened to the dagger the Nihilist watchword, and then crept away to my own rooms."

"It was a hellish plot," I exclaimed, hotly.

"It was inspired by love for you, Alexis. It was truly 'For Freedom's sake.' Freedom that should unite us for ever."

"Do you think I could ever be anything to a woman whose hand is red with murder?" I cried, in indignant horror.

"It was done for you—for love of you, Alexis."

"Love has no kin with murder," I exclaimed, bitterly.

"Your life is mine, remember," she answered, firmly. Her determination and strength were inexhaustible. "This makes you ten thousand times

more surely mine than ever. I told you you were the cause—and also, that you could be made to bear the brunt. Listen! You know well enough what chance a Nihilist has on whom the fangs of suspicion have fastened. You are a Nihilist. Your sister is one also. I know this. Well, what chance, think you, would that Nihilist have of his life whose dagger it was that found its way between my husband's ribs. What then, if I had found the sheath of it and secreted it to save the man? Suppose too, that I had kept back the discovery because of my guilty love for him. And further that he had come at the time to tempt my honour and that he was leaving the house when my husband, roused by the noise I made, met him; and that I saw the deed done?" She paused and changed her tone to one of fierce directness, as she continued:—"The dagger that killed Christian Tueski is your own weapon, known by its sheath to a hundred people: and that sheath, with your name on it, is in my possession. What chance of life would there be for you and yours if these things were made known. Now, do you wish to go?"

A hot and passionate reply rose to my lips, but was checked before uttered. I thought of Olga, and I knew that every word this woman said was true—that no power in Russia could save my life or Olga's liberty if the tale were told now.

Delay I must have at any cost. Time in which to meet this woman's horrible cunning and daring plot. If I had hated her before, she was now loathsome; while the fears she had stirred on Olga's account intensified and embittered a thousandfold my resentment. Yet hateful as the task was, I was prepared to continue my part with her.

"You think this love?" I said, after a pause in

which she had been waiting breathlessly for me to speak. "Do women love the men they hold to them by the tether rope of threats?"

"Do women kill for the sake of men they do not love?"

"Do you think to keep my love by threatening me with death?"

"Have I not inflicted death to keep you? Why do you wish to bandy phrases? My deeds speak for themselves. They shew you well enough what I will dare to keep you true to me. You are mine, Alexis, and no power shall ever part us. I have told you this often before. It was you who sought me, who proffered me your love, who poured on me your caresses and roused the love in me, and roused it never to cease. Do you think me a silly simple fool to be wooed and won and, when deserted, willing to do no more than wring my feeble hands and shed silly tears, and prate and maunder between my stupid sobs, that my heart is broken and that I fain would die—Bah! I am not of that sort. I am a woman who can will and act, and fashion my own ends in my own way. It is not the stream that carries me, but I who turn the stream even though it be mingled with blood. No, no. If you play me false, Alexis, it is you, and not I, who shall die because my heart is broken."

She shewed this determination in every line of her beautiful face and movement of her magnificent figure, as she stood before me a lovely hateful type of a vengeful woman. She changed her mood, however, with astonishing suddenness and turned all softness and tenderness.

"But under all this lies my love," she said. "It was love drove me to everything. Your pledge,

too, that made me feel, as nothing else could have done, the wall of separation between us while he lived; and my love could not endure it. Ah, how I love you!" and then in words burning with the fever of passion, she spoke of her love for me, lingering over the terms as if the mere utterance of them were an ecstatic delight. She laid all to the account of this love, and then went on to name her terms—that I must marry her.

While she was speaking, I was thinking; trying to see some flaw in the devilish coil she had spread round me. But I could see none. Time might find a way: but even time she grudged, and did not mean to give.

"But we can't be married now at the moment when your husband is scarcely lying cold in his grave," I said, aghast at her cold-blooded proposition. "Every man and woman in Moscow would immediately think we had murdered him together in order to marry."

"Every man and woman will not know," she answered calmly. "Do you think there is no such thing as a secret marriage possible in this Holy Russia of ours, or that gold cannot buy silence here just as anywhere else in the world?"

"I know that a secret marriage under these circumstances would put the lives of us both into the keeping of anyone who knew of it, however well you paid them. The more you paid, indeed, the more certain the inference."

"I care nothing for that; nor will you if you love me as you have often sworn you do." She uttered this with the energy and passion which always were shewn when she was crossed. But in this I was naturally as resolute as she.

"I will not do it," I said very firmly. "Under-

stand me. I will not do it. It is nothing to do with love in any way at all: but simply self-protection. It would be sheer suicide, and that I can do much more simply in other ways. I refuse absolutely to put both our lives into the keeping of any man in Russia, however holy and however well bribed. When we are married, it must be openly, in the light of day and before men's faces; and that most certainly cannot be until all this excitement about your husband's death has died down, and the marriage can take place without causing suspicion. That must be at least six months hence —and probably a year or even two years."

"I won't wait," she cried instantly and angrily. "You want to break with me. I am no fool."

"As you will. Then instead of marrying me you can denounce me and come and see me beheaded or strangled. If you threaten me much longer," I said bitterly, "you will make me prefer one of the latter fates."

She bent close to me, trying to read my thoughts.

"And meanwhile?" she asked,

"Are you such a mad woman that you would have us placard the walls of the city with our secrets? Haven't we all Russia to hoodwink? Do you suppose your police agents and secret agents are all fools, to see nothing, think nothing, infer nothing? It may be hard for us to be apart, but what else is possible? Even this visit is fool-hardiness itself and may set a thousand tongues clacking. Heaven knows, if ever a pair of lovers had need of caution we have now! Have you dared so much for our marriage only to toss it all away now just for the lack of a little self-control? We must see very little of one another. That is the only possible course."

"I'll not consent," she cried again, vehemently, and broke out into a fresh storm of protests and reproaches. But I held to my decision, confident that she would see she must give way.

We parted without coming to any definite decision; and I was glad, because it spared me the infliction of those outward signs of affection in which she delighted to indulge and which now would have been more than ever repulsive.

But the knowledge of the increased peril and embarrassment overwhelmed me with a feeling of anxious doubt and most painful and galling impotence.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NEXT NIHILIST PLOT.

It seemed to me when I thought over my interview with Paula Tueski, that the complications which surrounded me could not possibly be increased. It was of course hopeless to think of leaving Russia except by some stratagem, or in disguise; and this would be all the more difficult because Olga must leave first, and her flight would undoubtedly turn attention on me.

A positively baffling set of conditions faced me therefore, whichever way I turned. If I stayed on, Paula Tueski would insist on the marriage, and the crisis would come that way. If I attempted to go, she herself would join with the police in following me, and the mere endeavour to fly would give just that colour to her story which would make all the world ready to believe it.

Again, if I tried the remaining alternative of proclaiming my identity, I had so egregiously compromised myself that I could not hope to escape heavy punishment of some kind; while it would certainly implicate Olga and at the same time have no effect against the direct lies Paula Tueski was ready to swear.

Above all, a great change had come over me.

I wished to live and keep my freedom. The old indifference and apathy were gone. My object now was to get both Olga and myself out of the country in safety; and thus I took diametrically opposite views of difficulties which a few days previously—before I had made the discovery of my love for Olga—would have caused me little more than a laugh of amused perplexity.

Baffling as the puzzle was, however, it became infinitely more involved and perilous a few days later. Two fresh complications came to kill even every forlorn hope.

My Nihilist friends were responsible for the first.

The belief that I had struck down the Chief of the Secret Police and had done it in a manner so secret, mysterious, and impenetrable that it staggered the most ingenious police spies and defied the efforts of the astutest detectives, surrounded me with a glamour of wholly undeserved and undesired reputation.

The first intimation of this had reached me through Olga, and was followed by several others; and I received clear proof that I was now regarded as a sort of leader of the forlorn hopes of these wild and desperate men. A man who could alone and unaided achieve what I was believed to have accomplished was held capable of the greatest deeds. So they appeared to argue; and I was accordingly picked out next for a task of infinite danger and hazard in a plot of even more tremendous consequences than that of the recent murder.

It was nothing less than the assassination of the Czar.

It was resolved, by whom and in what centre of the Empire I never knew, to follow up the murder of Christian Tueski by the greater blow, and to

strike this with the utmost possible despatch: as a proof of the desperate courage and daring of the Nihilists.

I was chosen to play one of the chief parts. I had no option to refuse. There was no choice given me. The task was committed to me; just as a command might have been given me by my military superior officer. When I attempted to decline, I was given to understand that refusal meant death.

I was thus placed in a position of cruel difficulty and I pondered with close self-searching what I ought to do. Looking back I think I made a blunder in not disclosing all I knew to the authorities, leaving them to take what steps they pleased; but in forming my decision at the time I was swayed by a number of considerations most difficult to weigh.

One of my chief reasons for holding my tongue was that as the plot followed so soon after the Tueski murder—for the plans were all made within a week—the fact that I knew so much of Nihilist plots at such a time, would bring both Olga and myself under suspicion of having been privy to the former one. In such a case everything I wished to win would be jeopardised. A single breath of suspicion would have been enough to sweep us both into a gaol; and once there, no one could say when, if ever, we should come out; for the whole country was red-hot against the Nihilists, and men of the highest rank and wealth were rotting in gaol side by side with the most abject and destitute paupers.

I was also much concerned as to my supposed past. I knew that the old Alexis was gravely compromised; but what he had actually done, I did not

know. If any old offences were raked up I should be certain to be called to account for them now, while Olga would inevitably suffer with me.

For those reasons I decided to hold my tongue and to seek my own means for causing the infernal scheme to miss its aim. I reckoned that, as I was to have a principal part assigned to me, I could by my own effort, either through apparent stupidity or by wilful design, wreck the whole project; and with this object I thought carefully over every detail of it which was entrusted to me.

The scheme was ingenious and, save in one respect, simple enough. A fortnight later the Emperor was to pay a visit to Moscow, and already preparations had commenced for his reception. At one time it was thought he would refuse to come because of the Tueski murder; but with that unerring accuracy that always made me marvel, till I ascertained the cause, the Nihilist leaders learnt the Imperial intentions before they were known in some of even the closest official circles.

What the Czar decided to do was to have all the preparations continued as though the original arrangements for the visit were to be carried out; but at the last moment to make a change which would baffle any plots. He meant to alter the arrangement of the train by which he would travel: and this at the very last moment.

The object of this was, of course, to thwart any plot that might be laid to attack the train in which he travelled, so that thus the plotters might be discovered.

But the double cunning of the Nihilists was quite equal to this change: and the plot was indeed exactly what the officials had anticipated—to wreck the train in which the Czar travelled—and I think it

was chosen for the very reason of its apparent obviousness. Given precise information of the Imperial movements and a little double cunning in the plans, it was likely enough that the authorities would be especially vulnerable in just that spot in which they believed they had most effectively guarded themselves.

The official reasoning was that if the train in which the Czar was publicly but erroneously believed to be travelling could pass safely, then that in which His Majesty would actually be, would be sure to get by without mishap. The Nihilist plans were laid in full knowledge of the official theory.

A part of the line about ten miles from the city where the rails ran in a dead straight course over a comparatively flat country for some five or six miles was chosen for the attack; and it was chosen because it was that which the authorities would the least suspect, since it was most easy to watch and guard. A man standing at either end of the long, flat, straight stretch could with a glass watch, not only the line itself, but also the land adjoining the line. Of all the spots the train would pass this was by far the unlikeliest to be selected for any Nihilist attack.

The most prominent and conspicuous spot of all was that, moreover, which was picked out for the actual attempt. At that particular point a shallow dip in the fields caused the line to be embanked to a height of some ten or twelve feet; and the key of the plan was to fix levers to two of the rails so that they could be moved at the very last moment, just when the train was within a few yards of them. In this way the train would be turned off the metals and sent over the embankment into the field.

The levers, worked by electric motive power, were of course out of sight under the wooden sleepers: and the wires were trailed in tubes down inside the embankment and away through field-drains to a house more than half a mile distant from the line, where the operators were to remain until after the "accident."

Personally, I did not dislike the scheme: because I thought I could see several ways in which I could prevent any fatal outcome; should I have to remain in the country long enough to compel me to take part in it. It would be easy enough for me to appear to lose my head at the last moment, for instance, and so bungle matters that the men who were to kill the Emperor would be in fact prevented from approaching him.

But there was also in this a desperate personal risk to myself. I knew that these men would be picked from among the most reckless and daring spirits in the Empire; men suffering under the grossest personal wrongs as well as motived by wild political fanaticism. To them the blood of either friend or foe was as nothing if it stood in the way of what their unbalanced minds deemed justice and right.

It was thus a perilous and slippery eminence to which I had been thrust, and it increased infinitely the hazard of my course.

My thoughts returned to the idea of flight with redoubled incentive, therefore; and a circumstance occurred which seemed to promise me some help in this direction.

A letter came to me from "Hamylton Tregethner." Olga's brother had escaped, as we knew, and had made his way to Paris. He was going on, he said, to America as soon as he had enjoyed himself:

and when he found himself in New York, he purposed to change his name and nationality once more and be a Pole.

"I have not had many adventures," he wrote; "nor do I seem to have met many men who know me. But I had one encounter that was rather amusing. I was at breakfast and saw a man staring hard at me from the other side of the room. I thought he might be a friend, and so I did not look at him. But he would not let his eyes move from me, and when I left the table he followed and spoke to me. 'Hamylton, old man, I did not know you at first. You're looking frightfully ill and altered. You're not going to cut me.' This gave me a cue, though I did not understand all he said, when he added something about 'on account of somebody's conduct.' I id cut him, however; looked him hard in the face and curling my lip as if in profound contempt, I turned on my heel. I had the curiosity to ask afterwards who he was, and they gave me his name as the Hon. Rupert Balestier. I suppose I know him, but I thought the best way was not to speak. I did not shake him off, however: for that night he saw me again just when I was speaking English to some other men. I saw him listening as if he could not believe his ears; and as soon as I was alone he came up and asked me who I was and what right I had to masquerade as his old friend, Hamylton Tregethner. For answer I gave him another stare and got away. Then I changed my hotel and am going away from Paris for a few days. I do not intend to be bothered by the man."

My first impression of this incident was that it boded further danger. I knew Balestier. He was a man of great resolution and if he imagined that

anyone was masquerading in my name in Paris, he would think nothing of rousing both the English and Russian Embassies; or of coming on to Moscow himself to probe the thing to the bottom. He loved mysteries; was most active, energetic, and enterprising; and nothing would suit him better than to have imported into his rather purposeless life some such task as a search for me half over Europe. He was quite capable, too, of jumping to the conclusion that the man he had met had murdered and was personating me; and in a belief of the kind he was just the man to raise the hue and cry in every police office on the Continent.

What the real Alexis called "speaking English" was of course bad enough to brand him anywhere as an impostor, should he try to pass himself off as an Englishman. Balestier had no doubt listened in amazement to the strange jargon coming from lips that looked like mine; and the extraordinary likeness and "my" peculiar conduct would quite complete his perplexity.

Probably I should hear more of the matter; and this set me considering whether I could not manage in some way to communicate with Balestier and get him to help in smuggling Olga across the frontier. He would revel in the work if I could only find him.

I turned to "Tregethner's" letter therefore to find the name of the hotel, and to my infinite annoyance the fool had not mentioned it; while his intention to run away from Paris and Balestier would cause more delay. The fellow was not only a coward but an idiot as well; and I could have kicked him liberally, if my foot would only have reached from Moscow to Paris.

As it was, Balestier, with the best will in the world,

would probably be blundering about and plunging me still deeper into the mud, when he not only could, but would, have given me valuable help if I could have got at him to tell him what to do.

I felt like Tantalus, when I thought of it.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE.

THE second complication was a much bigger matter; and it was of so strange a description and fraught with consequences of such critical importance to Olga and myself that of all my experiences of that time it deserves to be classed as the most remarkable. Like all else at that time, it came quite unsought by me, and as the direct and unavoidable consequence of the first step in my new life—the duel with Devinsky and my subsequent repute as a swordsman.

A day or two after Tueski's funeral, and while the city was still quivering and staggering under the effects of the supposed Nihilist blow, a great ball took place at the Valniski Palace.

Count Valniski was among the richest men in Moscow, bidding hard for power and courting popularity right and left among all classes. To this ball all the officers of my regiment were invited, together with many of their friends. Amongst the latter Olga had a card; and although we were certainly in a poor mood for a function of the kind, we felt it expedient to do what all the world was doing, go to it; lest by remaining away we should attract attention to ourselves.

It was a very brilliant affair, as these big Russian

balls always are, and the crowd included many of the best and smartest people in Moscow. I moved about the rooms, not dancing much, but exchanging a word now and then with my brother officers and with other people who claimed acquaintance with me.

Olga had plenty of partners among my comrades, and as she was dancing with one of them I stood watching her and thinking how completely I had dropped into the new social grooves of this Moscow life and how quickly my first feelings of strangeness had worn off, when my friend Essaieff came up to me.

"Alexis, I have a commission that concerns you," he said.

"Well?"

"You're in luck. Try and guess."

"Can't," I replied, shaking my head. "Unless the war's broken out and I'm to have a step. What is it?"

"There's a woman in it. High up, too." There were only two women in Moscow I ever thought about; and one of them I wished to see safe out of Russia, and the other at the devil, or anywhere out of my way.

"Give it up," I said, with a smile.

"It's that smile of yours fetches 'em, I believe," said Essaieff, smiling in his turn. "It makes your face one of the pleasantest things in the world to look at." He had ripened quickly into a very familiar friend and we were great chums now.

"What is there you want me to do, old man? You wouldn't waste that flower of speech for nothing."

"Well, something's done it. I have been asked to present you to one of the wealthiest, most beautiful, and most influential women in Moscow—

the Princess Weletsky; and asked in terms which seemed to imply that the honour of the introduction would be conferred on her."

"The Princess Weletsky, who is she?" I asked in absolute ignorance.

"That's just like you, Alexis. I'm getting to know that sweet innocence of yours. Whenever I mention a name that all Russia knows, you make the same lame show and ask, Who's he? or, Who's she? You've heard of her a thousand times. You can't help hearing of her. You couldn't if you tried."

"All right," I laughed, to turn my mistake. "Have you been talking about me?" He laughed at the idea.

"Why, man where are your wits? Do you think the Princess and I are on gossiping terms? I'm only the fly on the wheel in this. She wishes to know you; I do know you; she once sent me a card for one of her assemblies and snubbed me in a high bred manner; now she can use me, and accordingly I am paraded for duty—to introduce you. Come along or she'll be getting some Court executioner to cut my throat for loitering."

I followed him, wondering what it could mean; and half a minute later was presented to one of the most lovely and stately women I have ever seen. A queenly woman, indeed, and I should have been an icicle if I had not admired her. She was radiantly fair in both hair and complexion, but her eyes were dark and languishing like a Spaniard's: while the faultless regularity of her features in no way marred the exquisite suggestion of womanly sympathy and mental power which spoke in her voice and manner and glances.

I have seen many lovely women of all types,

but in all my life none to compare with the exquisite magnificence of this Russian beauty.

Her reception of me could not have been more cordial, moreover, had I been one of the greatest of Russia's nobles, or had she begun to entertain some strong favour for me. I am not a coxcomb where women are concerned, I hope, and certainly nothing in their treatment of me in my life had led me to conceit myself that such a woman as this would fall in love with me; but her conduct to me that night might well have turned my head, had it not been full of other matters.

I asked for the honour of a dance and she gave me her programme, telling me I might write my name where I would. As it was empty, this seemed a generous invitation; but I scribbled my initials against two dances, and was then going to move off.

She glanced at the programme and smiled. I cannot describe the effect which a smile produced on her face.

"I had purposely kept the next dance for you, Lieutenant," she said. "But I see your reputation has somewhat belied you."

"My reputation?"

"Yes. But I have much I should like to say to you. I have heard of you often; as a daring man even among Russia's most daring; and not always as modest as brave."

"Rumour is often an unreliable witness," said I.

"She has not always spoken kindly of you, Lieutenant. But to see you is enough to test the truth of her tales." She accompanied this with a glance of especially subtle flattery, as she made place for me to sit by her, and then drew me to talk by questioning me, always giving in her answer a suggestion of keen personal interest in me.

We danced that next dance, and she declared that I waltzed better than any man in the room; and at the close of the dance she asked me to take her to one of the conservatories, under the pretext that she was heated. We sat there during two dances, until the first that I had initialled came, and then we danced again.

All the time she fascinated me with her manner and the infinite subtlety with which she implied the admiration she felt for my bravery, my skill as a soldier and a swordsman, my strength—everything in short: while she was loud in the expression of the interest with which she said she should take in my future.

At the close of the dance she sent me to fetch my sister; and when I presented her she made Olga sit down at her side and presently sent me away, saying that women's friendship ripened much more quickly when they were alone—especially if they were interested in the same man. All of which would no doubt have been very sound philosophy —had Olga been my sister in reality.

Essaieff had been watching me, and now chaffed me a good deal about my conquest, and grew enthusiastic about my future.

"By Gad, man, she's as rich as a Grand Duke: and there is no limit to the height her husband may climb. Play your cards well now: and you've got all the pluck, aye, and the brains too, if you like to use them: and you'll be War Minister before I apply for my Colonelcy."

I laughed lightly; but I thought to myself that if he only knew the skeletons in my cupboard that were gibbering and rattling their bones in mockery of me, he wouldn't tell quite such an enthusiastic fortune for me.

"Take another two grains, mouse."

—*Page 191.*

When I went back for my next dance with the princess, Olga was just being led away by a handsome young partner whom the Princess had found for her.

"Olga is most delightful," she said, with one of her smiles. "She is worthy of—anyone; and a most enthusiastic sister. She is the most genuine soul I ever knew. She will be my dear friend, when her reserve has worn off." I thought I knew the cause of the "reserve," but I kept the thought to myself.

After the dance she let me take her back to the same place, and glancing at her programme let it fall on her lap with half a sigh.

"You were very moderate," she said, tapping the programme with her fan.

"Do you know the fable of the hungry mouse?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" This with a glance.

"Only that a poor little starveling found himself in a full granary one day, when a fairy bade him eat. He took a few grains and munched them and stopped. 'Why stop there, mouse?' asked the fairy. The little thing glanced about him and looking at the crowd of fatted pets that were watching him suspiciously from a distance, replied:—'If I take more than these gentry think belong to me, they will fall on me; and though I might enjoy the meal at the time, it will prove a dear one and hard to digest.'"

"A shrewd mouse, but too timorsome," said the Princess, laughing, and handing me her programme again. "Take other two grains, mouse. Though I'm not quite sure by the way, whether you intended me to be the good fairy or the bag of grain. Fables are often tricksy things."

"And fairies also. But at least mice are harmless."

"Except to frighten silly women. But I am not afraid of mice—especially when they are so moderate in permitted pilfering."

"The touch of a fairy's wand can change even a mouse to a lion," said I; and when she met my gaze she dropped her eyes and coloured. The dance came then and we danced it almost in silence.

After it I went to look for Olga; but she had gone home; and then I waited impatiently for my next dance with my most fascinating partner.

There is no flattery in the world half so telling on a man as a lovely woman's admiration, undisguised yet not flaunted; and expressed in the thousand subtle ways which her nimble wits can find when inspired by resolve to please.

I did not think that at such a time any woman on earth could have exercised so strong an influence over me in the course of no more than an hour or two; and when we sat together after our last dance for a few minutes before she left, I felt I would have done almost anything on earth that she asked to serve her. Something that she said drew from me a rather random protestation to this effect, and she reddened and started, and then after a rapid searching glance shot into my face, she sat silent, fingering her fan, restlessly. While doing this her programme caught her attention.

She looked at it and held it so that I could read it.

"No name but yours," she said, almost in a whisper. I saw this was so. Then she broke the silken cord by which it was fastened to her wrist, and with another glance at me put it away into her bosom.

It was a little action: but from such a woman what did it not mean? I was amazed.

Another long pause followed.

Then she laid her hand in mine and looked straight at me.

"Are you really a brave man?" she asked. I seemed to take fire under her touch and look.

"That is not a question a man can answer for himself. Test me."

"If your sister were insulted, would you fight for her?" She little knew the cord she had touched, or guessed how the reference cooled me.

"I have already done so," I returned.

"In days of old men fought for any woman who was wronged. Would you?"

"I have done it before now," I answered, still thinking of Olga, and my thoughts for some reason slipped back to the first meeting on the Moscow platform.

She paused and looked away from me for a moment as if hesitating; and then leaning so close to me that I could feel her warm breath on my cheek as she spoke, while her grasp tightened on my arm, she said in a tone of deep feeling:—

"I have been wronged. You see me here as I am and what I am; but save for the happiness you have made me feel in being with you, I am the most wretched woman in all Russia. Will you help me? Dare you?" And she seemed to hang on my words as she waited for my reply, her eyes searching mine as if to read my answer there.

I was about to reply with a pledge inspired by the enthusiasm with which she had fired me, when my instinctive caution restrained me. She was quick to see my moment's hesitation and not willing to risk a refusal, she added hastily:—

"We cannot talk of this here. I ought not to have spoken of it now: but you seem to have drawn

my very soul from me. Come to me to-morrow to my house. I will be alone at three. You will come—my friend?" An indescribable solicitude spoke through her last two words, all suggestive of infinite trust in me.

"Certainly," I cried. "And certainly your friend, if I dare."

She answered with a glance; and then seemed to cast aside her excitement. Rising she let me lead her back to the ball-room.

When I left her there were others round us, but as she bowed I caught a glance and the whispered words:—

"I trust you."

I turned away half bewildered, and went home at once, pondering what was to be the upshot of this new development.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REASON OF THE INTRIGUE.

WHEN I was alone and the strange charm of the Princess Weletsky's presence had given way to calm reflection, my doubts began to grow. I was naturally a cautious man under ordinary circumstances; and now my suspicions were the keener because my caution had been momentarily lulled to sleep.

I was all inclined to disbelieve the story which the Princess had told, or rather had suggested; and I began to look behind all she had said for some motive or intrigue. I thought she might wish for the help of my sword for some altogether different purpose than she had suggested: but I could think of nothing. Nor could Olga, with whom I spoke very freely on the subject.

She said she could see no more than appeared on the surface; and what that was it was superfluous to ask; especially when she told me that the Princess could, or would talk of nothing else to her but my bravery, my good looks, my courtesy, my chivalry, and so on at great length.

"It is agreeable to have my brother praised," said Olga once, laughing. "But there are limits."

During the next four or five days Olga had ample opportunities of hearing these praises, moreover, as

the Princess would scarcely let her out of her sight. When I called on the day following the ball I found the two together, and the Princess in a few words we had together out of my sister's hearing would say nothing at all about the subject of her wrongs. She enlarged on the suggestion of the previous night that she had been led by her impulses and her instinctive trust in me to speak too fully.

For some days she maintained the same attitude of reserve, and then quite suddenly when we were alone, she changed again, and in words which I could not fail to understand she let me know indirectly that if I would avenge her wrongs, her hand would be my reward.

I have never in my life had to face a more awkward crisis than that. What reply she expected I cannot tell: whether she looked for some eager passionate protestations of love, or some strong pledge of defence, or what. Whether she really cared for me and the confusion she shewed was the sign of it, or whether the whole part was assumed and everything mere acting, I cannot say. But I know that I on my part felt indescribably embarrassed and scarcely knew how to answer her.

I knew, too, the danger to Olga and myself of offending a woman so highly placed, so influential, and powerful as the Princess. We had enough troubles as it was: and if they were to be multiplied and aggravated in this way, we should be overwhelmed. It was certain that I must find some way of temporising.

"Princess, I am your devoted servant to do with as you will," I answered. "And if my sword can be of service, tell me how." She started and flushed with pleasure as I said this.

"I knew I should not count on you in vain.

The Grand Duke Servanieff will now learn that a more stalwart arm than his protects me from his insults." Her eyes seemed to glitter as she watched the effect of this name on me.

"Do you mean that that is the man you wish me to fight?" I cried in the deepest astonishment. He was all but on the very steps of the Throne, and if I had approached him he would have brushed me away into a gaol with no more concern or difficulty than he would have whisked a fly off his hand.

The woman was mad.

"He persists in forcing his attentions on me, and I will not have them," she said.

All my suspicions had been stung into activity by the mention of the name of the Grand Duke; and as I looked at the Princess she appeared to be watching me with quite suspicious vigilance as she added:—"He cannot refuse to meet anyone to whom I give the right to protect me from him."

It was an intrigue. I was sure of it; and this lovely woman was making me her tool.

I answered guardedly.

"A lieutenant in a marching regiment who should presume to challenge that man would stand a better chance of being whipped at the cart's tail than of meeting him."

"He is a great swordsman, I know," she said, as if to pour suspicion on my courage. But I was not a fool to be tripped by a gibe. If I had wished to marry the woman I would have consented readily enough there and then, and risked all; but my object was to get out of Russia and to get Olga out with me.

"I should not fear him were he twice as skilful; but this is no mere matter of sword fence."

"Easy words, Lieutenant."

"I will make them good, Princess," replied I, quietly. "But I must first see the course clearer for the meeting. What say your friends? Can I depend on their influence?"

"Won't you do this for me, then? Am I mistaken in you?" There was a sharp accent of irritation in her tone that I noticed now.

"Princess, it does not best become a beautiful woman to doubt a man's courage until he is proved a craven. Here is no matter of personal courage only; but I should be loosing upon me all the waters of bitterest political intrigue. Alone I should be absolutely powerless to stem the torrents that would sweep me to certain ruin. Alone, therefore I cannot do what you ask. But understand me, give me the powerful support of your family, and I will meet the man, were he fifty times the Highness that he is—if we can arrange the meeting."

She seemed disappointed at this; quite unreasonably so; and tried to move me. But I stood firm, and then with evident reluctance, she told me her brother was with her in the matter, and that if I would see him all would be simple.

"My brother, Prince Bilbassoff, is, as you know, Minister of the Interior, and is now in Moscow in connection with the visit of the Emperor." I had not known who her brother was; but when she gave me the name and told me where I could see him, a rapid conclusion leapt into my thoughts.

Prince Bilbassoff was the real power behind the Police, and I was probably going to find now why Christian Tueski had had to hold his hand against me.

I went at once to see him.

I found him the very opposite of the popular ideal of a bureaucrat—a short, grey, close-haired, spare

man, with the air of a man of the world, and a pleasant cheery manner that suggested nothing formidable or even powerful. Yet without doubt the man was in many respects the most powerful and the most feared in all Russia.

He appeared to be expecting me; for the instant I was announced, he got up and welcomed me with a hearty shake of the hand and said:—

"I thought my sister would have to make us acquainted, Lieutenant Petrovitch. She said she wouldn't; but I expected you. Women think beauty will do everything; and somehow are always calculating without the effects of self-interest. Don't you think so?" He spoke with a sort of easy club mannerism, and just let his eyes rest a moment on my face.

"Of course you know the drift of what has passed then?"

"Of course I do. As well as I know that your coming to me means that my sister's method has failed. I from the first disagreed with it. I know a great deal about you, Lieutenant Petrovitch; and I think I could have saved time. But my sister was attracted to you—women always like you handsome young fire-eaters, especially women like my sister—and as she is to take a rather large hand in the matter, she wanted to play it her own way. She appealed to your feelings, Lieutenant. I should have gone straight to your interest: and really it will be to your interest to do this."

"Will you tell me plainly what is wanted?"

"Certainly. The death of the man whose name has no doubt been mentioned to you."

"Why?"

"Not because he has insulted my sister: though that is fortunately a plausible pretext: but because he is a menace to the Empire."

His bluntness astounded me.

"Do you take me for an assassin?"

"No. I take you for a very resolute young man, with a great skill of fence, a large desire to push your fortunes high, and not too much scruple to act like a sword scabbard between your legs and trip you up. If you weren't that, you'd be no use to me. As you are, I open before you a career such as lies before no other man in the Emperor's wide dominions at the present moment. Do this, and you win a woman as rich and beautiful and, as women go, as good as any in Russia for a wife; and you can ask and have almost what place you like, either in or out of the army."

"And if I refuse?"

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"You won't refuse," he said, shaking his head. "If you do, you will be a young fool—too foolish to be trusted at large."

I knew what he meant; and when I looked at him next, I understood why men feared him. That laugh of his would usher a man to the knout or the gallows.

I thought rapidly.

"I like the project," I replied. "But can you arrange the meeting?"

He was as quick as the devil, and detected the false note in my voice.

"Lieutenant, there are two courses open to you," he said in a tone so sharp, stern and ringing that the change surprised me. "You can accept or refuse the offer—but don't try to fool me."

"Well, then, I'm not a murderer," I rapped out, angered by his words.

"That's better," he said, with a return to his light clubbish manner. "But this is no murder.

The man is a traitor: and no juster act could be compassed than his death."

"Then why not do it openly?"

He smiled and threw up his hands.

"Is justice always done openly? Of course we might do that: but he would laugh at our efforts. We might get him assassinated; but he is too powerful and the noise of the act would defeat the very object we have. He is a swordsman worthy of your skill. He has insulted, and will again insult my sister, your betrothed—for what is not an insult when you wish to make it one?—and he would delight to meet you. He will think he can kill you. Perhaps he can: may be, probably; for he is a very devil with the weapon. That is your risk. Will you take it? It's no light one. But you are a young fellow with all to gain in winning and nothing to lose but your life. You will do it, I know. I'm only surprised you hesitate."

I sat thinking: but not in the groove he guessed.

"We'll make your sister's fortune as well," he said, raising the terms. "She shall make a marriage into one of the best families in Russia, and found a family of the highest distinction. Think, Lieutenant."

I was thinking about as hard as I could: but no opening offered itself.

"I must have time to determine," I said. "It seems to me that I run the chance of playing the cat's paw with all the flame for my share. What guarantee have I that if I do this and am successful I shall not then be deemed—too foolish to be trusted at large, as you say?"

"First, my honour; secondly, your betrothal to my sister; and thirdly, her feeling for yourself."

"And if I refuse, Siberia, I suppose?"

"No, not so far as that," he replied, lightly.

"But what if I feign to consent and carry the story to the man you threaten?"

"There is that chance of course. But in the first place he would not believe you, Lieutenant; and in the second, if he did, neither you nor he could do any harm; and in the third, you would have me for an enemy. And I am pleasanter and safer as a friend, I have discounted that risk, and it is nothing."

"How long will you give me to decide?"

"A week. We can then announce the betrothal just before the Emperor's visit here, and gain the Imperial blessing on so righteous a marriage between a brave man and a beautiful woman, each motived by the highest patriotic feelings for Russia."

With this half sneer ringing in my ears, he sent me away.

CHAPTER XIX.

OLGA'S ABDUCTION.

I WENT home in a very unenviable frame of mind, and my temper was not improved by my meeting my old opponent, Devinsky, near my rooms.

For the moment I was powerless to think of any possible means of relief. My helplessness was so complete as to be almost ludicrous: and if it had not been for Olga, I would have just let myself be dragged along by the singular chain of events which had coiled themselves round me.

I must rouse myself to some sort of effort for her sake. I saw that, of course. But the result of a couple of hours' thinking was only to increase my utter perplexity; and I went off to bed to try if sleep would clear my wits.

I resolved to see Olga the next day as soon as possible after my regimental duties were over. There was but one thing possible. She must go at once and we must try to hit on some plan by which she could escape at any hazard. But my regimental work was heavier than usual, and when it was over a meeting of the officers was called in reference to the impending visit of the Czar to Moscow. It was thus late in the afternoon before I could get to Olga.

At the house, astounding news awaited me.

The Countess Palitzin met me with the question where Olga was. I looked at her in astonishment; and then she told me a message had come from me early in the forenoon, asking Olga to go round at once to my rooms. She had gone, promising to return soon or send word. She had done neither; and a six hours' absence had made the old lady anxious.

"She should have been back before this," I said, quietly, not wishing to add to her alarm. "Who do you say came for her?"

"Your servant, Borlas, Olga told me."

I tried to reassure her that all was right, though I did not at all like the look of things, and I hurried back to my rooms to question Borlas. He had not been there on my return from barracks, and he was not there now; and there was nothing to shew that he had not been absent for some hours.

Did this mean treachery? Or had Olga been arrested? Could she be in the hands of the Nihilists? Or what? A thousand wild thoughts flashed through my mind as I stood for a minute thinking what I ought to do first, and where to look for her.

Then I recalled my meeting with Devinsky near my rooms.

I dashed out and ran to Essaieff's rooms to find out all he knew about Borlas, as he had recommended the man to me; and to learn whether he would be likely to be bribed to do such an act of treachery as now seemed possible. But my friend was out. Leaving word for him to come at once to me I went on to Madame Tueski and questioned her. She equivocated, suggesting that I was feeling her power; and with the utmost difficulty I drew from her that despite all her hints she knew nothing.

I ran then to the Prince Bilbassoff; but he was away. I hurried next to the Princess; she knew nothing, but was full of sympathy and offers of help.

I wanted news, however, not offers of help; and I rushed back to my rooms, on my way to the police, on the off-chance that Borlas had returned.

He had not: but in his place there was something much more important. A rough, wild looking countryman was standing at my door, holding the bridle of a shaggy pony that bore signs of heavy travelling; and the man had been trying vainly to get into my house. He addressed me, asking where he could find Lieutenant Petrovitch; and then gave me a slip of paper from Olga.

"*Am suspicious and sending this back. If anything wrong, follow me. O.*"

I then questioned the man closely and he said that his wife was called to the window of a carriage to a young lady who was ill. When she had recovered, she gave his wife a handkerchief. In it was the message and a sum of money and a request that it—the paper—should be brought to me at once. This had occurred at Praxoff, about ten miles out on the north road.

In less than a quarter of an hour I was armed and mounted; and a few minutes saw me free of the city and flying at full gallop in pursuit. I knew the road well enough, owing to my long residence as a boy in Moscow; and I now put my horse to its utmost speed and made straight for the house where Olga had seen the peasant woman.

I found it without the least difficulty and got a description of the carriage, horses, and postilion; and I questioned the woman as to every word Olga had said to her and who was in the carriage.

From what she said, I judged it was Borlas, and that the two were alone.

I stayed no longer than was necessary to hear all the woman had to say, and then I rode on still at full speed, asking right and left as I went for tidings of the carriage. The trail was broad enough for anyone to follow for some miles and then I came upon information that gave me a complete clue to the whole matter.

Reining up at a wayside inn, I put the usual questions; adding that the lady was my sister and that I was an officer in the Moscow Infantry Regiment. The landlord came to me instantly.

"You are Lieutenant Petrovitch?" he asked.

"Yes," and I told him my errand.

"Have you been engaged in a duel this morning?"

I stared at the man and asked him what he meant. His answer shewed what story had been concocted to trick Olga.

"A gentleman engaged two rooms here this morning, saying they would be wanted in connection with a duel in the neighbourhood. One of the combatants was Lieutenant Petrovitch; and the latter's sister was coming to be near at hand in case of her brother being hurt. She was coming out with the brother's servant and when she arrived was to be shewn at once to the room engaged for her. As a fact the duel had already been fought in the early hours: Lieutenant Petrovitch had been badly wounded and lay at a private house a few miles further on, too ill to be moved. The sister was to be told this; the news being broken gradually; and she was not to be allowed to leave the inn, unless she insisted very much, in which case the servant would know where to take her; and fresh horses were to be supplied. I told her gently,"

continued the landlord; "and she insisted on going on at once without even stopping for food. Fresh horses were put in accordingly, and the carriage proceeded with less than half an hour's halt here, all told."

I saw the ruse in a moment. It was to get fresh horses without Olga being suspicious; and to draw in the landlord so as to appear to give the story corroboration.

"What was the man like who came to you?" I asked impatiently, ordering a horse to be saddled instantly. In reply the landlord described Devinsky accurately.

I saw it all now; and when the man had given me a valuable clue to the road which the carriage had taken—it had been met by some returning postboys—I set off again in pursuit in the now gathering dusk, as fast as I could make the new horse move.

I rode on till the dark fell: and still on till the moon rose and flooded the land with her thin light; and it was not until ten at night that I reached the end of my journey. Some peasants gave me the final clue. They had met the carriage and a question had been asked of them as to the whereabouts of a certain house. They told me now where this was, and a few minutes later I reached the place.

It was an old ramshackle house, once the seat of a family of good position but now fallen upon evil days. It made three sides of a square and the courtyard in the middle was all weed-grown, moss-covered and uneven, with one large yew tree standing dark and gloomy in the centre. The main entrance was in the middle portion; and there were two small gothic arched doors in the wings. But these seemed very stout as I examined them; and all the windows were latticed with stout ironwork.

Just the spot for such a venture as this, I thought, as I stole about the place to reconnoitre, treading softly, and keeping as much as possible in the dark shadows which the walls made.

There was not a sound to be heard, nor a light to be seen; while the look of the place made it certain that I should have a hard task to force my way inside. The same unpromising look of things met me when I left the front and crept round to the back and when I had seen all round the house I could not make up my mind what was the best thing to do.

There are times, however, when any kind of action is better than doing nothing. There was everything to be gained and nothing to be lost by Devinsky learning that I had followed him and knew his hiding-place. I resolved on a pretty bold course, therefore, and drawing my revolver I stepped out into the full moonlight and walked quickly to the main entrance.

I had reached to within ten yards of the door when a voice called to me:—

"Who goes there? What do you want? Stop, or I fire."

Looking up I saw the gleam of a rifle barrel levelled dead at me. I did not stop to answer but leaping aside, I darted forward into the doorway, where the man could not cover me with his weapon, because of a shallow porch which intervened to protect me.

The incident shewed me the sort of welcome I was to expect.

There was an old and heavy knocker on the door, and a huge bell-pull. I seized both these and set up first a knocking that might have roused the dead and then a clanging of the bell equally

I darted forward into the doorway.

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furious and dinning. Presently the bell ceased to sound and I gathered either that someone within had cut the wires or that I had broken them in my energy. The great knocker suited me equally well, however—perhaps better, as the noise rang out on the still night air, making a fearful din—and if there did chance to be anyone within half a mile of the place they would hear it and might hasten to learn the cause.

Those inside took the same view of the matter, apparently; for suddenly and without my knowing the cause, I found the big heavy door give way before one of my lusty attacks with the knocker; and as I pushed, it swung slowly open.

Everything within was as dark as pitch; and the contrast between the row I had been making and the dead silence that followed was so profound as to make me stand a minute that my ears should get accustomed to the change.

Then drawing my sword and holding my revolver in my left hand, I stepped in and tried to peer about me.

The light of the moon gave a faint reflection within, but not enough for me to be able to make out anything distinctly; nor, when I strained my ears could I detect the slightest sound anywhere.

My first thought was that as I stood in the doorway, I should be an excellent mark for anyone caring to shoot, and I slipped aside therefore, into the heavy shadow of the big door. It was full five minutes before my eyes, keen as they are, could distinguish anything; and then I seemed to make out two doorways, one on each side of a large hall into which the big door opened, and beyond them in the middle a broad stairway.

I groped my way warily a few steps, feeling

along the wall, when I stopped and began to reflect that I was making a fool of myself in attempting single-handed and in pitch darkness to find my way about the place. I must wait for a light of some sort. I had no idea how many men there might be in the house. I did not know a square foot of the plans. While I was blundering about in the dark I should be an easy prey for men whom I could as easily fight in the daylight. Moreover I argued that the knowledge that I had tracked him would keep Devinsky from attempting any devilment as yet.

I was in the house; and I resolved therefore to wait patiently where I was in the hall until I had light enough to guide me in my search for Olga.

But I could not keep to the resolution.

Scarcely had I formed the plan when the stillness was broken by a woman's scream, shrill and piercing, and a cry for help that made my heart leap into my throat with wrath as I thought I could recognise Olga's voice.

Without another moment's hesitation, and uttering a loud shout in reply, I dashed forward to where I could see the outline of the stairway, and rushed up in the direction of the cries for help.

Idiot that I was! Of course I rushed straight into the trap that had been laid for me. As I reached the top and turned to dart along a corridor, my feet were tripped and I fell sprawling headlong with a clatter and a dozen oaths to the ground, my sword flying one way and my revolver another; and before I could help myself three or four fellows were upon me, and though I fought and struggled with them and nearly choked one on to whose throat I fastened my grip, I was overpowered and bound securely hand and foot. Then

I was blindfolded and gagged, and in this absolutely helpless state, carried down the stairs again, getting on the way two or three hearty kicks from the men I had pummelled. They threw me down on the floor of an empty room and left me.

I cursed my folly bitterly when I heard the fellows' footsteps as they left the room and locked the door behind them. I had spoilt all for the lack of a little caution. I was an idiot, a fool, a numskull, a jackass, to have been caught by a trick which a child might have anticipated; and I rolled about the floor, cursing myself and tearing and pulling at my bonds in my passion, till I had torn the flesh in a dozen places. But I could not loosen a single strand of all the cords that bound me; and I gnashed my teeth and could almost have shed tears in my baffled rage and fury.

I lay thus some hours till the light must have come, for even through the heavy bandages on my eyes, the darkness seemed tinged with grey. As I thought of the use I might have made of the light, my self-reproaches welled up again till I felt almost like a madman.

Later on I heard the door unlocked and two or three men entered. They came and turned me over and holding me firmly, cut the ropes that bound my arms, and then tied my hands behind me in iron handcuffs, drawing them so tightly that I could not move them without pain. When I was so far secured they cut the ropes from my legs and bade me stand up. I tried; but the rush of the released blood brought with it too much pain, and I was just as helpless as a baby for some minutes. When at length I managed to scramble to my feet, they unfastened the bandage from my eyes and as soon as my dazed sight could focus itself, I saw that

brute Devinsky looking at me with a sneering laugh.

"So it's you, is it?" he cried, as if in surprise. "Turned robber, eh, breaking into men's houses in the dead of night? And what the devil are you doing here? My men told me there was a thief here, but I didn't expect you."

"Don't lie to me," I cried sternly. "You know well enough why I'm here. Where's my sister. If you're not too damned a coward, get me my sword and let's settle this thing together and at once."

He winced at the taunt, but he didn't mean to fight that way.

"Thank you. I don't fight with burglars. I hand them over to the police—when it suits me. I always thought there was something secret about you; now I know what it is. You've been living by this sort of work I suppose. Officer by day, and footpad by night. I'm glad my men have caught you at last." Then he sent them away; and as soon as we were alone he asked me:—"Do you value you life?"

"Yes, for one reason. To take yours."

"Well, you can have it—if you like to be reasonable."

"I make no terms with a villain like you."

"More fool you," he laughed. "You may as well face the position. You are in my power. This house is big enough and strong enough to hide a regiment, let alone one man. You can't stop me now from carrying out my intention in regard to your sister, by fair means or otherwise; and you may as well make the best of a bad business, and own that I've got the whip hand of you, partly by my luck and partly by your own damned stupidity. I'd rather have you on my side in this matter than against me; but with me or against me you can't stop me. What do you say?"

"This. That the first use I'll make of my hands when they're free shall be to try and choke the life out of you. And by God, I'll try and do it now." In my rage I rushed upon him, but like the cowardly cur he was, he struck me, bound and defenceless as I was, with all his force in the face, and then with a cry brought in the other men. These threw themselves upon me and bore me to the ground, and bound my legs again, so that I was once more absolutely helpless.

"You saw that attack the villain made on me," said Devinsky to the men. "I was offering to release him. You'll bear witness to that. As for you," turning to me, "you can stay here for a few hours more to cool your murderous fever; and I will send back orders for your release, when I am at a safe distance. And, remember, there are strong cellars below; and if there are any more attempts at violence, I'll have you put there."

He went out then with the men and in a moment later returned alone and said in a voice full of rage and hate:—"I'm going through with this, Petrovitch, at any cost—if I have to shut you up here till the flesh rots off your bones. Your sister and I are going further on shortly: and I'll see you once more before I start, and give you one more chance of listening to reason." And with this he left me.

My plight was worse than ever. So far, Olga was safe. That was the only glimpse of comfort in all the miserable situation. It was clear, too, that she was in the house; and though she was still in the man's power, I might yet find some means of helping her.

But how? That was the question. And when I thought of his words that he was going to carry her still further away, I turned sick with rage and loathing.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RESCUE.

I FELT as though the heat of hell were burning in my veins as I lay on the floor with the remembrance of Devinsky's blow and his words turning my blood to fire. If ever I were free again, I swore to myself over and over again, I would have his life for that blow. My anguish and rage that he should have Olga in his power were infinite tortures, and all the less endurable because of my abject helplessness.

The one chance I had of deliverance was that someone, perhaps Essaieff, should hear of the matter and follow me. But the hope was so feeble as to be little more than tantalising; fool-like, I had rushed off without leaving any intimation of what had happened. If he did follow me, indeed, it would be only after a long interval, and not until Devinsky would have had time either to get far away or to carry out his purpose.

Then I began speculating as to what he meant to do. He would scarcely dare to try and make Olga his wife against her will and consent; though he was evidently villain enough to go to great lengths. In this way my thoughts ran over the ground trying to ferret out a means of escape as well as seeking a key to the man's motives; and thus

another hour or two slipped away without my hearing a sound or getting a sign of anyone.

The strain of suspense was enough to turn one's brain.

But a wholly unexpected and most welcome interruption came to break in upon my reverie. Outside I heard the tramp of horses being ridden at a sharp trot into the courtyard of the house, with a jingling of arms and accoutrements that told me the riders were either soldiers or mounted police. A sharp word of command brought them to the halt; and as soon as that happened, I let out such a lusty yell for help as made the walls ring again and again.

Then my door was opened and two men rushed in and ordered me to be silent, under pain of instant death, and clapped revolvers to my head. But I knew they dared not fire with such visitors at the door and I continued to yell with all my lung power until, throwing down their weapons, they first clapped their hands on my mouth and then thrust a gag into my jaws.

Some five minutes passed and the tension of my impatience was unendurable. Meanwhile the two men held me and cut the bonds from my legs and got ready to slip the gyves from my wrists.

Presently the tramp of feet approached the door of my room and when it was opened an officer of the mounted police entered with a file of men at his heels. Devinsky was shewing the way and speaking as they all came in.

"As I have told you, he made an attack on the house in the night; my men secured him. When I saw him, I recognised him, of course, and should have released him, but he tried to murder me—angry, I presume, at having been discovered and recognised at such work. I then had him bound

again and was going to send to-day into the city for the police, when you came. If you'll take him away, that's all I want."

The man in command of the police listened to this in silence and with a face that shewed no more expression than a stone gargoyle.

"Release him," he said to his men, and in another moment I was at liberty. As soon as I was free, I began to edge my way inch by inch toward where Devinsky stood. I would have him down, police or no police, thought I, even if it were my last act before entering a gaol. I guessed of course that some Nihilist blabber had told the facts, and that I was bound for Siberia, or worse.

"Lieutenant Petrovitch, you are to accompany me, if you please," said the leader; and a sign to his men set two of them at each side of me.

"I have first one word to say to that—gentleman," I said, pointing to Devinsky.

"Excuse me. My instructions are peremptory. I must ask you to go with me at once—without a minute's delay."

I saw Devinsky's face brighten at the thought of thus getting rid of me: and my fingers itched and tingled to be at his throat.

"Am I arrested?" I asked. "For what?"

"I can say nothing, Lieutenant," replied the man.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"If you please, we must go, and at once," was the stolid reply.

I saw Devinsky grin again at this.

"This man has carried off my sister," I cried. "She is in his power now, and it was when I came to find her that he tricked me and then had me bound as you see. Send your men to find her. She must return with us."

"I have no instructions to that effect," replied the man curtly.

"Damn your instructions," I burst out hotly. "Are you a man—to leave a young girl in this plight?" My reply stirred only anger.

"I cannot do what I am not ordered to do," said the officer again curtly.

"Then I won't go without her. Go back and—or better, send one of your men for permission to do this and stay here and keep guard over me and my sister at the same time."

"It is impossible. My instructions are peremptory and nothing will let me swerve from them."

I began to lose all self-command, and only by the most strenuous efforts did I prevent myself from heaping reproaches upon him for his cold-blooded officialism.

"Will you leave a couple of men here then, to protect her?"

"I can say no more, Lieutenant, and do no more than I have said. And now, we must go."

It maddened me beyond all telling to think that I was to be carried away in this ruthless, heartless, implacable fashion at the very moment when the rescue of the girl I loved more than my life was but a matter of walking into another room and bringing her out. I was staggered by the blow.

"Do you know that I would ten thousand times rather that you had left me here bound and helpless as I was than take me away in this fashion. I must see my sister. I must save her—why man, are you lost to every sense of feeling? Take her away first—make her safe; and then I swear to Heaven, you or this man can do with me what you please."

The stolid stony impassiveness of the man's

face crushed every hope out of me. I could have struck him in my baffled rage.

"I have twenty men in the troop here, Lieutenant. My instructions are to take you at once to Moscow. I prefer to use no force; but I have it here, if necessary."

I wrung my hands in despair; and then with a wild dash I rushed to the door to try and find Olga for myself. It was useless. They closed on me in an instant, and I was helpless. Then they marched me out to the horses, venting as I went bitter reproaches and unavailing protests, mingled with loud curses, laments, and revilings.

"Will you give me your parole to go quietly, Lieutenant?" asked the leader.

"On one condition. That we ride at full speed all the way."

"I can make no condition," replied this block of official stolidity; "but my instructions are to act with all haste. One question—have you been illtreated here?"

"Only as I told you."

Then he went back into the house for a moment, saying he would speak to Devinsky about it. I saw the latter change colour when he received the police report and he made a gesture of seeming repudiation, lifting his hands and shrugging his shoulders. After that he threw me a malicious look from his angry evil face that almost made me clamber down from the saddle to try and have a reckoning with him there and then.

"When I'm out of this, I'll hunt you out," I cried, between my teeth.

"When!" he answered: and the sneer in which he shewed his teeth as he uttered the word, was in my eyes for half that long, wild ride.

The police leader kept his word; and we rode at a hard gallop nearly all the way, the whole country side turning out as we thundered by.

The man would not say a word to me on the journey, except that he had been ordered to hold no communication at all with me; and thus I did not know where they were taking me, or whether I was arrested or rescued, until we drew rein at the Police head-quarters in Moscow and I was ushered straight into the presence of Prince Bilbassoff, all dirty, dishevelled, bruised, and travel-stained as I was.

He rose and met me, holding out his hand.

"My dear Lieutenant, you are really giving me an unconscionable amount of trouble. As much, indeed, as if you were already a member of my family."

"What does all this mean?" I asked. "Am I arrested?"

"What an impatient fellow you are! It will all come in time," he returned, with an indescribable blending of good nature and suggestive threat. "Is this all the thanks one gets for rescuing you from what, judging by your appearance, has been a very ugly mess. This harum-scarum business will really have to stop—when you marry." He seemed almost to laugh behind his grizzled moustache in the pause that emphasised the last three words.

"Will you tell me the real meaning of this? I have already asked you."

"Sit down;" and he sat down himself, and lounged back easily in his chair. "By the way, have you lunched?"

"For God's sake man, don't trifle in this way. If you know the facts, as I suppose you do, you'll know I'm in no mood for bantering courtesy. Why

am I torn away by your men by force at the very moment when my sister is in danger at the hands of the brute who has carried her off. I suppose you know all this. What does it mean, I repeat."

"You can understand, perhaps, Lieutenant, that as it is two days since my sister referred you to me, and you had left Moscow hastily, she was growing a little anxious. You know something of women in love and their insistent moods."

"To hell with all these plots and intrigues," I cried, furiously. "If you mean that that devil Devinsky is to have my sister in his power and I am to sit down coolly and bear it while you talk to me about marriage, you don't know me. I'll think of nothing, talk of nothing, do nothing, till I have either saved her and killed that villain, or am killed myself."

"Do you mean that you will set me at defiance?" cried the Prince, in stern ringing tones, his eyes flashing at me. "That you dare to flout the offers we have made you, and have the hardihood to set the needs of the country below your own little petty personal feelings and wishes? Do you know what that means, sir?"

"I care not what it means," I answered, recklessly. "I tell you this to your face. If my sister be not saved at once, I'll never set eyes on you or your sister again, unless it be that you make me grin at you from behind the bars of some one of your cursed gaols. That is my last word, if it costs me my life."

He rose and looked at me so sternly that I could almost have flinched before him if my stake in the matter had not been so great. I never met such a look of concentrated power before.

"If you dare to repeat that, Lieutenant Petrovitch,

I will send you straight to the Mallovitch," he said, with positively deadly intensity of tone, pointing his finger through the window to where the gloomy frowning tower of the great prison was visible.

"I care not if you send me to hell," I cried. "Save my sister, or my hand shall rot at the wrist before I lift it in your service."

We stood staring intently dead into each other's eyes; and he stretched forward a hand to summon those who would carry out his threat.

Then he breathed deeply, smiled, and offered me his hand instead.

"By God, you're the man we want, in all truth. Now, I'll tell you what you ask."

He had only been testing me after all, and my wits were so blunt in my agitation that I had not seen through him.

"Have no fear for your sister," he continued. "She is quite safe. My man gave that Devinsky a message when he was leaving that puts all doubt on that score aside. She is part of our bargain, and the arm of the State is over her. If you accept my offer at once, your sister herself shall decide that man's punishment. My object in all this is twofold—to let you feel something of the substance of power that will be yours when you have consented; and secondly to test a little more thoroughly your staunchness. I am satisfied, Lieutenant. And I hope you are."

"Where is my sister now?" I asked, after a moment's consideration.

"Where you left her, of course. Decide how you wish her to come to Moscow. Shall my men fetch her? Shall that man bring her back himself? Or will you ride out. It is a matter of the merest form—but as yet, of course, you are unaccustomed to your influence and power."

He was the devil at tempting; and though he had told me his motive, and I knew the rank impossibility of doing what he wanted—I could not help a little thrill of pleasure at the consciousness that this power lay within my grasp.

"I will ride out and bring her in myself," I said, with a flush of pleasant anticipation at the thought.

"As you will. This will do everything," he said, as he wrote me an order in the name of the Emperor. I knew its power well enough. "One condition, by the by. You must not fight this Devinsky; nor do anything to provoke a fight."

"I won't promise," I answered.

"Then I give no order. Your life is ours, not yours to play with. That is the essence of the matter."

"I will promise," I said, changing suddenly as I thought of Olga and the delight of seeing her under the circumstances. "My word on it. I do nothing except in self-defence, or in defence of my sister."

"Well, be off with you then," he said, rising and shaking hands, and speaking as lightly as if I were a schoolboy being sent off for a ride; and as though there were not between us a jot or tittle of a plan in which life and death, fortune and marriage were the stakes.

I hurried back to make preparations for riding back at once; and half an hour later I had had my first meal for twenty-four hours and was again in the saddle, pricking at top speed along the northern road, followed by one of the Prince's confidential servants, sent as the former said to me, with especial instructions to look after the welfare of one who was soon to be a member of the family.

There is no need to describe with what different emotions and thoughts I made that journey. It is enough to say that I dashed along at top speed, haunted by half a fear that something might yet go wrong with the plans and that Olga might still be in some danger; while a desire more keen than words can express came upon me to have her once more under my own care.

At the same time the sense of power to which the appeal had been so astutely made was roused, and I was conscious of an unusual glow of pride.

When I reached the house where I had had the ugly experience of the previous night I looked out for any sign of hostility. But there was none. A man came immediately in answer to my summons, aud Devinsky was waiting for me in the large hall, which I scanned curiously after my night's experience in it.

The sight of Devinsky roused me, but I put the curb on my temper.

I handed him the order in silence. He read it and sneered.

"It is a good and safe thing to shelter behind Government powers," he said. "Your sister is upstairs. This way." He led and I followed, my heart beating fast.

We passed up the stairs and then turned along a corridor to the right, and after turning again to the right, and entering, as I thought the right wing of the rambling old house, we went up another short and very narrow flight of stairs. Then he opened the door of a room in silence—indeed we had not spoken a word all the time—and stood aside for me to pass.

Olga was sitting at the far end of the room looking out of the window, which was on the side away

from the courtyard, with a woman attendant near her; and she did not even turn round when the door opened.

But when I uttered her name and she saw me, she sprang up, speaking mine in reply with such a glad cry, and ran to me with a look of such rare delight on her face that I think she was going to throw herself into my arms and I was certainly going to let her, oblivious of all but the rush of love that moved our hearts simultaneously.

When she was close to me, she checked herself, however, and put her hands in mine, as a sister might. But the glances from her eyes told me all I cared to know at that moment, while her gaze roamed over me as if in bewilderment.

"How is it you are better—and out? Where is your wound? What is that mark on your face? I don't understand. They told me you were lying dangerously wounded and that you wished me to remain here until you could bear to see me."

"There is a good deal you don't understand yet, Olga," I said. "The story of the duel was a lie from start to finish."

"Then you're not wounded? Oh, I'm so glad, Alexis" and, moving her hands up my arm after a timid glance at the woman, she looked her thankfulness and solicitude into my eyes.

The look made me speechless. Had I tried to answer it in words, I must have told her my love.

"You are to come with me, Olga," I said, presently, recovering myself. "The aunt is all impatience to have you back again."

"Why? I explained all to her in my messages."

"Your messages got lost on the way," I answered, and she saw by my tone how things were. She got ready to come with me without another

word; and I could feel my heart thumping and lurching against my side as I watched her and caught her turn now and again to look at me and send me a little smile of trust and pleasure.

There was no need for us to speak much; we were beginning to understand each other well enough without words.

We went out of the room together, and I was surprised and glad to see on a chair close by the door the sword which I had dropped the previous night. I took it up, and as I did so Olga cried out in great and sudden fear.

I looked up and saw Devinsky at the narrow head of the short stairway.

"I've complied with the order," he said, his voice vibrating with anger. "And I've given your sister freely into your hands. You are at liberty to pass —alone." He said this to her and then turned to me: "But not you, till you and I have settled our old score."

"As you will," replied I, readily. "Nothing will please me more. But stay," I cried, remembering my promise. "I cannot now. I have passed my word. Stand aside, please, and let us pass."

"Not if you were the Czar himself," he answered, hotly. "And I'm not going to let you shield yourself either behind the Government—you spy!—or behind your sister's petticoats. If she doesn't choose to go when she has the chance, let her stop and see the consequence."

"Olga, you had better go on," I whispered. "This may be an ugly business, and not fit for you to be here."

"Where you are, I stop—come what may!" she answered, firmly.

"I've not come here to fight now," I said to

Devinsky. "I'll meet you willingly enough another time, God knows. But now, I've passed my word;" and with that I raised my voice and shouted with all my strength to Prince Bilbassoff's servant, who was below, to come to my assistance.

For answer Devinsky called on a couple of men who until then had been hidden, and with drawn swords and a loud shout the three rushed forward to throw themselves upon me.

CHAPTER XXI.

THREE TO ONE.

A GLANCE round told me the attack had been shrewdly planned indeed. The spot in which we all were was a large square anteroom or landing place, lighted from above. Four or five doors opened from it into the rooms on either side, and the narrow stairway was the only means of communication with the rest of the house. I was caught like a rat in a trap, and unless I could beat off the men who were thus attacking me at such dangerous odds, I was as good as a dead man.

I whipped out my sword and pushed Olga back into the room we had left, just in time to parry the first wild lunges Devinsky made at me; and at the first touch of the steel all my coolness came to me.

Everything must turn on the first minute or two; and knowing my man I set all my skill to work to keep him so engaged as to hamper the attempts of the other two to get to close quarters with me.

I worked back into a corner of the place, close to the door of the room, and then as I darted out lunge after lunge with the swiftest dexterity, my

three opponents were compelled to get into each other's way in their hurried manœuvres to avoid my strokes. By this means I hampered their fighting strength and lessened it by at least one man, since all three could not possibly get to strike at me at the same time. But even thus the odds were too heavy.

Devinsky was nothing like my equal with the sword, and his rage and mad hate now rendered him less deadly than usual: but with two others to help him, I could hardly hope to win in the end. For this reason as I fought I uttered shout after shout to the man below to come to my assistance.

These cries had also the effect of disconcerting my opponents.

Then a lucky chance happened.

One of the men in jumping back out of the way of one of my thrusts stumbled over the second, and sent this one for a moment into Devinsky's way. I saw my chance and seized it in an instant. In a trice I rushed at the half prostrate man and disdaining to kill him when his guard was down, I kicked him with my heavy riding boot with all my force in the face, and sent him reeling back, groaning and half choked with the blood that came gushing out of his nose and mouth, while his sword, went rattling across the floor to where Olga stood, looking on aghast, breathless and open mouthed in her fear.

But the chance nearly cost me dear, for the man's companion turned on me and thrust at me with such directness and rapidity as all but ended the fight; for his sword went through the fleshy part of my arm, just above the elbow. An inch or so nearer the body would have sent it right

through my heart. It was the last thrust he ever made, however. The next instant my blade had found his heart, and with a groan he dropped.

Before I could withdraw it, however, Devinsky uttered a cry of hate, and dashing at me thrust at my heart with all his strength.

He must have killed me but for Olga.

That splendid girl had picked up the fallen man's sword and now, seeing my plight, she sprang forward, at the hazard of her life, crying out "Coward!" and struck down Devinsky's sword with all her force.

"Good," I cried; and the next instant, I had wrenched my weapon free and held the man.

"Take care. Back to the room, or behind me, child," I cried, when I heard my opponent curse in his foiled attempt to kill me and saw him turn as if to attack Olga. "Now, you butcher, it's you and I alone; and you or I, to live."

"As you will," he said, and I saw him clench his teeth and set his face n the way men do who know that they are face to face with a risk where failure means death.

My blood was up now, and I meant death too. He had given up all right to expect anything else, and I had no mind to let him off. If ever a man had earned death he had. He had heaped on me every indignity that one man could put on another, and to crown it all he had just tried to murder me. I would kill him with less compunction than one kills a dog; and I set about the task with the coolest deliberation and purpose.

The scene was a grim and ghastly one enough. The floor was all slippery in places with the blood of the man I had killed, whose body lay huddled up against the wall, as well as of the other who

sat on the ground still spitting and coughing and mumbling and cursing from the fearful effects of my kick. In the middle we two stood fighting to the death, watching one another with the fire of hate and blood lust in our eyes and on our set faces: while Olga, all eagerness excitement and tension, stood in the doorway watching us with white drawn face and dilated eyes; the deeply drawn breath coming in spasms through her distended nostrils and slightly parted lips,

I forced the fight with all my power, and my blade flashed about my antagonist until all his skill was useless even to defend himself against my point, while any offensive tactic was out of the question. I wounded him three times, once so close to the heart that Olga cried out: and at length recalling the knack with which I had disarmed him in our former encounter, I used it now; and after a few more swift and cunning passes I whipped his sword from his grasp and sent it rattling to the other end of the place.

My eye flashed as I drew back my arm for the death thrust.

"Ah, don't, Alexis," cried Olga, in a sort of whisper of horror. "Don't kill him!"

It stopped me instantly, and my arm fell.

"As you will," I answered readily; "but he doesn't deserve it. You owe your life to the woman you've tried to wrong, not to me," I said to him, shortly. "Stand out of the way and let us pass."

He moved aside doggedly, eyeing us with surly sullen hate, as Olga, trembling violently now that the excitement was over, went on first, and I followed her through the stairway and down and out of the house.

When we reached the courtyard, the postchaise

which I had ordered to follow us from the inn had arrived, and Olga and I entered it at once.

"Thank God, we are out of the house," was my companion's fervent exclamation, as the carriage turned into the road and we left the gloomy place behind us.

"Would to God we were out of Russia!" said I, speaking from my heart. "Then . . ." I paused and looked into her face.

"All may yet come right," answered Olga, meeting my eyes and putting her hand in mine. My clasp closed on it, and we sat thus for some moments, just hand in hand, each silently happy in the knowledge of the other's love.

Then I bent toward her and gradually drew her to me, my eyes all the time lighted with the light from hers.

"It is love, Olga; lovers' love?" I asked in a passionate whisper.

For answer she smiled and whispered back:

"It has always been, Alexis;" and she met my betrothal kisses with warmth equal to mine. And after that we did not care to say a word, but leant back in the carriage as it flew through the country in the gathering gloom of the evening, bumping, jolting, rolling, and creaking. What cared we for that? Olga was fast in my arms her head on my breast and her face close to mine, so close that we were tempted ever and again to let the story of our love tell itself over and over again in our kisses; and neither Olga nor I had a thought of resisting the temptation.

This would have gone on for hours, so far as I was concerned; I was in a veritable Palace of Delight with freshly avowed love as my one thought. But Olga roused herself suddenly with a start and a little cry.

"Oh, Alexis, what have you made me do? Your wound."

I had forgotten all about it, but now when she mentioned it my left arm felt a little stiff.

"I am ashamed of myself," she cried. "What a love must mine be, that I want to dream of it with selfish pleasure when you are wounded. You make me drink oblivion with your kisses."

"Love is a fine narcotic," replied I, laughing. "I felt no wound while you looked at me. But now that you bring me down to earth with a rush, I begin to remember it. But it is nothing much, and will best wait till we are in Moscow."

"Do you think I will let anyone see that wound before I do? Why, it was gained for my sake. And you love me? And now"—"now" was a long loving kiss and a lingering look into my face as she held it between her hands, while her eyes were radiant with delight. Then she sighed—"Now, I am all sister again."

I was looking my doubts of this and meant to test them, shaking my head in strong disbelief, when the carriage stopped suddenly. Looking out I saw that we were at the inn, and must therefore have been driving long over two hours. It had seemed scarce a minute.

"Will you get out while we change horses, sir?" asked the Prince's servant, who had come with the carriage on horseback.

"My brother is wounded and must have attendance at once," said Olga, in so self-possessed a tone that I smiled.

"Only a scratch," said I, as if impatiently. "But my sister is always fidgety."

We went into the house then, and Olga insisted upon examining the wound, and when she saw the

blood I had lost, not much, but making brave shew on my white linen, she was all solicitude, and anxiety. She sent the maids flying this way and that, one to fetch hot water, another bandages, a third lint, and altogether made such a commotion in the place that one would have thought I had been brought there to die.

She bathed the little spot so tenderly and delicately too, asking every moment if her touch hurt me; and she washed it and then covered it, and bandaged it and bound it up, and did everything with such infinite care that I was almost glad I had been wounded.

And the whole process she accompanied with a running fire of would-be scolding comment upon the trouble that brothers gave, the obstinate creatures they were, the rash and foolish things they did, how much more bother they were than sisters, and a great deal more to the same effect—till I thought the people would see through the acting as clearly as I did, assisted as I was by the thousand little glints and glances she threw to me when the others were not looking our way.

Then she held a long consultation with the landlady—a large woman who seemed as kindly in heart as she was portly in body—whether it would be safe for me to go on to the city that night, or whether a doctor had not better be brought out to me there: and it took the persuasion and assurances of us all to win her consent to my going on.

I tried to punish her for this when we were in the carriage again, by telling her I supposed she was unwilling to travel on with me. But I wasted my breath and my effort, as she was all the way in the highest spirits.

"I don't quite know which I like best," she said,

laughing. "Being sister with a knowledge of—of something else, as I was just now at the inn, or—or . . ."

"Or what?"

"Or riding with Hamylton Tregethner," she answered, laughing again, gleefully. "Do you notice how easily I can say that dreadful name?"

"I notice I like it better from your lips than from any others."

"I've practised it—and it was so difficult. But I might even get to like it in time, you know."

"By the way, I remember you once told me you didn't like Hamylton Tregethner."

"Ah, yes. That was my brother's old friend. A very disagreeable person. He wanted to take my brother away from Moscow. A person must be very unpleasant who wishes to divide brother and sister. Don't you think so?"

"That depends on the rate of exchange," said I.

"Perhaps; but at that time there was no talk of exchange at all."

"And no thought of it?"

"Ah!" And for answer she nestled to me again and merged the sister in the lover with a readiness and pleasure that shewed what she thought of that particular exchange.

And with these little intervals of particularly sweet and pleasant light and shade we travelled the miles to Moscow, in what seemed to us both an incredibly short time.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

It was not until a night's rest had somewhat redressed the balance of my emotions and had rendered me again subject to the pressure of actualities that I fully realised how the avowal of my love had rather increased than diminished the difficulties of our position.

Despite my fatigue and wound I was stirring in good time, and had had the doctor's report and seen the Colonel to get leave from regimental work, in time to get round to see Olga pretty early. I wished to see her and discuss the whole position before going to report to Prince Bilbassoff the result of things with Devinsky.

The manner in which Olga met me was one of the sweetest things imaginable and the presence of the good aunt, Countess Palitzin, added to its effect. They were sitting together when I entered.

"It is Alexis, aunt," said Olga rising. She was a mixture of laughing love and sisterly indifference.

"Alexis, you are a good lad, a dear lad," said the old lady, usually very stately and punctilious. "Come here, boy, and kiss me and let me kiss you. You have done splendidly and bravely in this matter of Olga. She has told me all about it."

"All?" I echoed, looking at Olga, who tried to keep the smile that was dancing in her eyes from travelling to her lips.

"All that a sister need tell," she said.

"Olga, I have no patience with you," exclaimed the aunt. "You have a brother in a thousand—in ten thousand, and yet you speak in that way. And I see you never kiss him now. I should like to know why. Are you ashamed of him? Here he has saved you from all this trouble, and you give him the points of your finger nails to touch. Yet you are not cold and feelingless in other things."

"I am glad that you speak to her like this," I said, gravely. "She seems to think that a sister should never kiss such a brother as I am."

"Do you mean to say you think I have given you no reason to believe I am thankful for what you have done?" she retorted, fencing cleverly.

"I don't echo our aunt's words, that you are cold and feelingless, Olga—she is not that, Aunt Palitzin. But I do find that as a sister she places a strong reserve on her feelings."

"To hear you speak," said Olga, laughing lightly, "one might think I had two characters: in one of which I was all warmth and affection; in the other all coldness and reserve."

"And I believe that would be about right, child," said the Countess. "For when the boy is not here your tongue never tires of praising him; and yet the moment he comes, he might be a stranger instead of your own nearest and dearest."

Olga blushed crimson at this.

"Brothers have to be treated judiciously," she said.

"'Judiciously,' Olga. Why, what on earth do you mean? How could you love a brave fellow like Alexis injudiciously?"

"Love is often best when it is most injudicious," said I, sententiously, coming to Olga's rescue; but she betrayed me shamefully. Looking innocently at me she asked:—

"Would you like us to be a pair of injudicious lovers, then, Alexis?"

"If I never shew more lack of judgment than in my love for you, I shall get well through life, Olga," I retorted.

"You are certainly a most unusual brother, I can tell you," she said, smiling slily.

"If every brother had such a sister, the tie that binds us two would be a much more usual one," I answered.

"You are incorrigible," she laughed and turned away.

"I am glad you speak so seriously, Alexis," said my aunt. "I'll be no party to any deception. She does love you, boy, however much she may try to hide it when you are here;" and with this, which set us both laughing again, the old lady went away.

"Does she?" I asked; and the question brought Olga with a happy look into my arms.

But I had not come to make love, sweet though it was to have the girl's arms about me; and as soon as I could, I began in talk seriously about the position.

In the first place I told her everything that had happened; and there was one thing that amused her, despite the tremendously critical state of our affairs. It was about the great suitor the Prince had promised for her.

"What, another?" she said, with a comical crinkling of her forehead. "Upon my word what with brothers and lovers, I am sorely plagued. This makes the..." she stopped.

"How many?"

"I don't think I know. Either two or three, according as we reckon you. While you're my brother, two I suppose. Otherwise three."

"'Otherwise' is a good deal shaky, I'm afraid," said I, shaking my head. "And I begin to question whether he'll ever count."

"He may not; but in that case no other ever will," returned Olga earnestly. "Did you say that on purpose to get another assurance from me?"

"No, indeed. I only spoke out of the reality of my doubts;" and then we went on threshing the thing out.

"There is but one possible chance," said I, after I had told her all. "It's a remote one, perhaps, but such as it is, we must use it. You must go...."

"I won't leave Moscow unless you go," she broke in. "I wouldn't have done it before when you wanted, but now...." she paused and blushed and her eyes brightened—"wild horses shan't tear me away."

"There are stronger things than wild horses, child; and I shall appeal to one in your case. You must go in order to try and get me out of the muddle here."

"Yes, I'll go for that, if it's necessary," she declared as readily as a moment before she had declined.

"It is necessary. Shortly, my idea is this. We can't get away together at the same time. We are shut in here in the very centre of Russia; and if we left together we could not hope to reach the frontier for many hours after we had been missed from here; while if we were missed only ten minutes before we got to the barrier, it would be long enough for us to be stopped. Besides.

there are ten thousand things that come in the way. But that doesn't apply to your travelling alone; and if I can get a passport or a permit for you, I believe you will be able to get across the frontier before anyone has an idea that you have even left the city. In my case that would be impossible. There are three separate sets of lynx eyes on me. The Prince's police—the most vigilant of all; the Nihilists—the most dangerous; and Paula Tueski's—the most vengeful. I shall have the most difficult task to evade them, and I believe it will be only possible, if at all, by a sort of double cunning. But there is one way you can help."

"What is that?" asked Olga, whose interest was breathless.

"I have a friend, Balestier; you've heard of him—the Hon. Rupert Balestier. He saw your brother in Paris and believes that some devilment is on foot. If you can find him and tell him all that has happened and the mess that things are in, I believe, in fact I know, that he would exhaust every possible means of helping me. It is possible that our Foreign Office might be moved by the influence he could bring to bear; and I know that in such a task he'd stir up every friend and relative he has in the world. My plan is simply this. You must go with all possible speed to Paris: find him, tell him all, and get him to do what he thinks best and use what efforts he can. In the meantime if I can't escape I shall either have to feign consent with this wretched duel and marriage business and wait on events: or if I get a chance of leaving, slip off in an altogether different direction."

"It is a terrible trouble I have brought you to, Alexis," said the girl sadly.

"I would pay a far bigger price for this trouble,"

I answered, taking her hand and kissing it. "And when we are once out of this too hospitable land of yours, we shall laugh at it all together."

"Yes, when?" she said; and her tone suggested a hopelessness which responded only too well with that which I felt secretly.

While we were together, however, it was impossible for us to feel downcast for long. There was such infinite pleasure in mere companionship, that the grim troubles which surrounded us were shut out of our thoughts. The present was so bright that it seemed impossible the gloom could soon close in on us.

But when I had left her and was alone in my rooms, I was gloomy enough; and my spirits were certainly not raised when my new servant ushered in Paula Tueski.

"You would not come to me, Alexis, so I have to come to you," was her greeting. "You neglect me. I suppose because of the great friends you have made."

"Great friends?" For the moment not understanding her.

"Yes. I hear that you are finding great pleasure in the society of a certain great lady."

"Oh, you mean the Princess Weletsky?" I laughed as I spoke.

"It does not make me laugh," she said, frowning.

"You are in mourning, and laughter sounds ill with tears," I returned. I hated the woman worse every time I saw her.

"If I am in mourning it is you who are the cause," she cried, stamping her foot, angrily. "I want to know what this new—new friendship, shall I call it?—means."

"You may call it what you like. The Princess

is nothing to me," said I, thinking more of my affections than of the facts.

"And never will be?" said my companion abruptly.

"And never will be, I hope," I agreed, with the accents of unmistakable sincerity.

But my visitor was suspicious and did not believe me. She got up and came close to me, and stared hard into my eyes as if searching there for the truth.

"Then why are you so cold to me? Not a kindly word, not a gesture, not a glance that you mightn't have thrown to the veriest beggar in the street have you given me. You, who used always to brighten when I came near you. I have seen your eyes light up a hundred times, Alexis, when you have let them rest on me, praising, pleasing, and loving me. And now you are as cold as a tombstone. Will you swear to me you have no love for this other woman—this Princess?"

"Most certainly I will."

"Ah, what is the use of an oath in which there is no fire, no life, nothing but dead cold ashes! What has changed you? Are you thinking of marrying this woman?"

"If she waits till I wish to marry her, she'll die unmated," I returned.

"Why can't you say yes or no to my questions?" she cried, stamping her foot again, irritated by the little evasion. "Are you thinking of marrying her?"

"No. Is that answer blunt enough for you?"

"It sounds like a forced lie more than anything else. Do you know what I would do Alexis, if I thought you meant to try and deceive me?"

"I can pretty well guess," I answered, calmly. "Probably go round and have afternoon tea with

her and tell her that little fable which you told me the other day. You weary me with these constant threats, Paula. They get like a musket that's held so long at one's head that it rusts at the lock and the trigger can't be pulled. It would be so much more interesting if you'd go and do something."

With that I turned away and lighted a cigarette, almost wishing in my heart that I could offend her sufficiently to drive her away; and yet sick at the knowledge of her power over Olga and me.

"I like that tone better," she said, with a laugh. "At least it shews some kind of feeling. I hate a log. You will find I can 'do something,' as you say, when the time comes, if you drive me. My muskets don't miss fire."

"No, nor your daggers blunt their points. I admit you can be deadly enough where you hate."

"Don't make me hate you, then," she retorted, quickly.

"Is that possible, Paula?" I replied, turning to her with a smile.

The instant change in this most remarkable woman at this one slight touch of tenderness was wonderful. She was hungering for the love I could no more give her than I could have given her the Crown of Russia, and at this little accent of kindness she turned all softness and smiling love.

"Ah, God! You can do as you like with me, Alexis," she cried, excitedly. "Just then you were rousing all the devil there is in me; and now no more than a smile drives out of my heart every thought save of my love for you. If it is so easy to make me happy why kill me with your coldness? Kiss me, Alexis." She came to throw her arms round me but wishing to avoid this caress, I remembered my wound and stepping back, kept her off.

"Mind, I have a little hurt here;" and I pointed to the place.

Little did I think of the consequences of that most simple action, or of the price I should have to pay for shirking a few distasteful kisses. She was at once all anxiety.

"A hurt? A wound? Tell me what it is. Have you—was it in consequence of rescuing your sister? Have you had some fight or other?"

I told her in as few words as I could, glad to turn her thoughts from the wish to caress me. When I had to admit that it was a slight sword thrust, however, she insisted upon seeing the wound as well as the places where I had torn my arm in the efforts to get rid of my bonds.

No one could fail to see her care was prompted by deep feeling.

I took off my coat and just turned up my sleeve to satisfy her curiosity, and held out my arm for her to see, laughing half shamefacedly as I did so, to assure her there was no cause for real anxiety, and that she was making much of nothing.

But the effect it had on her was startling indeed.

After glancing at the marks which were fast dying away, for my skin always heals very rapidly, she smoothed them gently and kissed them.

"It is the left arm, Alexis, always the left arm," she said, glancing up with a smile, and speaking as if there were some special significance in the fact—though what that could be I could not even guess, of course.

The chief mark was on the lower part of the upper arm, just above the elbow, and when she had kissed it and had turned it round so that the front part of the forearm, where the muscles are broadest was in full view, I felt her start violently,

and heard her catch her breath quickly, as if with a gasp of surprise.

She stared at it for fully a minute without raising her eyes, her only gesture being to pass her fingers across the muscles twice.

When she raised her eyes and looked at me, there was an astounding change in her face. She was as white as death, and trembled so violently that even her face quivered, while her eyes were fixed on me with an expression of wildness and mingled emotions such as I could not read or even guess at.

"Are you ill?" I asked.

She started again as I spoke; and her lips merely moved very slightly as she moistened them with her tongue.

And all the time she kept the same staring, strained, frowning, questioning look fixed on me.

"What's the matter?" I cried again. "Are you ill?" I thought she was in for a fit of some kind.

But all she did was to continue to stare with the same indescribable intensity, the heavy brows closing together as the frown deepened on her forehead.

"My God!"

The exclamation seemed to be wrung from her in sheer pain of thought.

She took hold of my arm again and examined the same place once more with briefer but no less fierce scrutiny.

Then looking up again into my face she let the arm fall. She seemed to shrink from me as she drew in one long deep shivering breath that sounded between her teeth. Next she turned away and sat down, pressing both her hands to her face.

Every vestige of feeling and passion had passed, leaving only the close, concentrated, strained tension.

The colour had left her cheeks: and the roundness and beauty of her face appeared to have been transformed in a moment into a veritable presentment of lean, haggard, vigilant doubt.

Many minutes passed before either of us spoke. Then she got up and again came quite close to me and staring right into my eyes, asked in a voice all changed and unmusical—a sort of keen piercing whisper, that seemed to send a chill through me—while she pointed to my arm:—

"What does it mean? Who are you?"

I returned the look steadily, but bit my lip nearly through as I guessed well enough the discovery she had made. I answered lightly:—

"Excellently acted. But what is it all about?"

"Who are you? That tells me who you are not." She spoke in the same hard discordant whisper, and pointed to my arm again.

"Are you mad?" I cried sternly. "What do you mean by this pretence?"

Her only answer was to stare with the same stony intensity right into my eyes.

"Shall I send for my own sister to identify me?" I cried, with what I intended as sarcastic emphasis. But the effect of my question quite disconcerted me.

It broke her down and with a cry that was almost a scream, she threw herself into a chair and gave vent to emotions that were no longer controllable.

For an hour she was in this semi-hysterical condition; and I could guess the leading thought of her frenzy. If I was not the man she had believed, she would jump to the thought that Olga and I were lovers, and not brother and sister. Her jealousy made her a madwoman.

By the time she had recovered from her frenzy

I had resolved on my course. The only thing possible was to hold strenuously to the old deception. What had shaken her belief in me, I could not, of course, even guess. If by any means she could make her words good, it was clear she carried my life in her hands. Strong as the story which she had concocted as to my supposed crime would have been against the real Alexis, it was a hundred times stronger as told against someone impersonating Alexis for what she would of course declare were Nihilist purposes. The mere fact of the impersonation would be accepted as proof of guilt in everything: while Olga's share in the conspiracy would render her liable to a punishment only less in extent than mine.

As I thought of all this, my rage against the woman passed almost beyond control; but I forced it back and listened when she spoke—telling me of all the things which had made me seem so different. My conduct to her; my manner; my lack of love; the difference in looks, in gestures, and in what I said and the way I said it; the thousand things that had set her wondering at the change in me.

Then she spoke of the change in my sister's conduct; how a word from me had made her friendly where a thousand words before had failed. And when she spoke and thought of Olga, she seemed to lose again all self-control; declaring she had been made a tool and a dupe of for some purposes of our own.

My protestations were of no avail. She brushed them aside with abrupt contempt, and when I tried to find out indirectly what her proof was, she laughed angrily and would not tell me.

"I will tell you when I bid you good-bye for Siberia, or see you for the last time in the con-

demned cell. You shall not die in ignorance," she said: and then she went on to dwell with horrible detail upon the punishments that were in store for both Olga and myself.

But she overdid it all; and shewed me her weak point. She thus gave me a clue to my best tactics. Her feeling was not hate of me, but jealousy of Olga. This strange and most impulsive woman had had her love tricked as well as her judgment; and the love which she had had for Olga's brother was now transferred to me. Her chief fear was lest Olga was really to come between us. When she stopped, I tested her.

"You have found a ridiculous mare's nest," I said, with a short laugh. "And I have something more important to do than to listen to your fictions. If you think there is any truth in the thing, by all means tell all you know. But I warn you beforehand you will fail—fail ignominiously: and what is more, lose all you have said you wish to gain. My great object now is to get Olga out of the country, so that I may be free to carry out my plans."

She looked up as I spoke, and I saw the light of hope in her eyes.

"That you may follow her, I suppose you mean?"

"You can suppose what you please," I answered, shortly. "If you wish to break off all between us by this ridiculous story, do so. But bear in mind, it is your act, not mine; and when once done, done irrevocably."

She wrung her hands in indecision.

"Can I trust you?"

"Can you get me a permit for Olga to leave the country? That's more to the point."

"Yes—alone." There was a world of meaning in that single word.

"Then get it; and as soon as a railway engine can drag her across the frontier, she will be out of Russia, and out of my way, much to my relief."

She sat silent in perplexity.

"You can't go! You shan't go!" she cried. "You have made me do these things, whoever you are, and you must stay—for me."

I smiled. I had won. Then I changed as it were to a rather fanatical Nihilist, and cried warmly:—

"The ties that keep me here, Paula, are ties of death and blood; and such as no woman's hand can either fashion or destroy."

She looked at me long and intently and put her hands on my arms and her face close up to mine and said in a soft seductive tone:—

"If I get that permit, all shall be as it was?"

"All shall be as it was, Paula," I answered, adopting her equivocal phrase, and bent and kissed her on the forehead. But I was playing for a big stake: Olga's life probably, and my own certainly: and I could not afford the luxury of absolute candour at that crisis of the game.

But I did not win without conditions.

"I will get it," she said; "but you remember what I told you before. I repeat it now. You are more surely mine than ever; more surely than ever in my power, Alexis." She emphasized the word and a glance shewed me her meaning. "And we must be married secretly within three days from now. I will make the arrangements."

"As you will," I replied; and I felt glad that in a measure her resort to this compulsion gave me a sort of justification for misleading her.

In less than three days' the Czar's visit would be over and I should either be dead or out of Russia.

But Olga would be saved; and that would be much.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHECKMATE!

As soon as Paula Tueski left me I went round to Olga to endeavour to solve the riddle of the woman's discovery. Olga was out and would not return for an hour. Leaving word that I wished to see her particularly and that she was to wait for me, I went for a walk to try and order my thoughts.

Finding myself near the Princess Weletsky's house, and knowing that I had to keep up the semblance of attentions there, I called. She received me with marks of the most warm regard and welcome.

"I have heard much of what happened at that wretched Devinsky's house. Old Fedor who went with you told me much and my brother much also; but I would rather hear all from you. Where is Olga? You were wounded, I hear. What was it? Tell me—tell me. I have been dying with anxiety for you."

I told her shortly what had happened; and then it occurred to me to try and get her help in regard to Olga. I drew a fancy picture of Olga's shattered nerves; that Moscow had become a place of terror to her; and that even Russia itself was distasteful to her for a time on Devinsky's account.

"Do you think that a man like Devinsky would

dare to lay so much as a finger on one of *our* family?" she asked, checkmating me quietly with a single pronoun.

"It's not what Devinsky dares, but what Olga fears."

"She did not strike me as a girl of nervous fears."

"No; she does not shew it even to me."

"Then we can do better than drive the poor child away from home—punish Devinsky. Tell her that he is already under arrest."

"Is that so, indeed?" I asked, in some astonishment.

"Certainly; his murderous attack on you when you were on the Emperor's special duty is a crime that will cost him dear. Those who play us false, Lieutenant Petrovitch, must beware of us. But our friends find the ways made easy for them. Did not my brother tell you that Olga was to be protected as one of us, and therefore avenged, if wronged?"

"She will be glad to feel safe," I replied quietly. I knew what she meant; and with a look that seemed to imply much, I added:—"I am glad to be one of your friends." I was getting such an adept in the suggestion of a lie, that much more practice would make it difficult for me to tell the plain truth.

My companion flushed with pleasure.

"I always felt I should not count on you in vain," she said.

"No woman has ever done that, I trust," was my answer. "No woman ever could for whom I felt as I feel for you." And with that, and a little more to the same effect, I left her.

I went round to Olga's at once. It was a blessing that with her there need be no secret meanings and insinuations.

She received me, of course, with a smile.

"Is this a pretence to see me, or really something?" she asked with a laugh.

"I think it is really something or I should not have dared to be back so quickly. Even brothers may be bores."

Her answer was a pretty one, such as might be expected from a lover, but I need not repeat it.

"First, I will tell you the news," I said, after a pause; and I told her about the arrest of Devinsky.

"These people strike swiftly and secretly, Alexis," she said, thoughtfully. "They frighten me. Their power is almost limitless. How hard they will hit and how far the blow will reach, if they ever find we are fooling them!" She sighed.

"The frontier is their limit: and we must pass it."

"I have been out to-day to make the preparations for flight. I suppose I must go?"—she smiled a sad little note of interrogation at me—"and if so, the sooner the better. I have a disguise, and shall start to-night. My difficulty will be of course at the frontier. I am going to stop short of that by one station, and then as a peasant girl try to get over on foot. It will take a little longer: but it is the only chance."

"No, I have good news for you so far as that is concerned. Madame Tueski will get you a permit in some name or other and then you can cross in the train. Far better."

"You have seen her then to-day?" A shadow of her old feelings crossed Olga's face as she asked this.

"Yes, I have seen her, and she is eager now that you shall get out of the country."

She was very quickwitted and read my meaning instantly from my words and tone.

"Tell me everything. There is more bad news yet to be told. Has she guessed?... Ah, I always feared that woman."

"Tell me, Olga, ought I to have any special mark on either of my arms. Any birth-mark, or anything of that sort?"

She went white instantly.

"I had forgotten. That wretched woman's initials were tattooed in small letters just there"—she put her finger on the place—"I saw it once and Alexis was wild with me. Has she seen your arm bare?"

"My wound," I said, in explanation.

"Oh dear, through me again; through me again," cried the girl in distress. I took her in my arms to soothe her, and tried to make her understand that after all it was really a good thing that had happened and not a bad one, inasmuch as the woman's jealousy was urging her to help in getting Olga away. I told her everything frankly.

But this was not all a clear course, as may be imagined. Olga loved me very dearly and trusted me, I believe, as implicitly as any woman could trust the man she loved. But she was a woman and not a goddess: and she could not bring herself to like the necessity which took her out of the country and left me behind in the clutches of such a woman as Paula Tueski. She was a very reasonable little soul, however, as well as a brave one; and before I left her I had talked her into a condition of compulsory resignation.

I did not attempt to disguise from myself, though I did from Olga, the fact that her flight after my conversation with the Princess would

certainly tend to bring suspicion upon me, if it should be discovered. Any secret step at such a juncture would do that. I thought I had better see the Prince himself, therefore, lest my neglect to do so should rouse his suspicions prematurely.

I went to him from Olga's house, and when I was admitted, after a little delay which I did not quite like, I found him as gracious as ever.

"I am very busy," he said, shaking hands with me; "but have time to hear that you have resolved to join us, Lieutenant."

"I have come now only to thank you...."

"I haven't time to listen to that. Your sister is again in Moscow; her persecutor is in the care of my men; you have only to say a word for her to be his judge. Do you say it?"

Seeing me hesitate, he paused only a moment.

"When a man like you doesn't say Yes, directly, he means, No. I understand. But—time is beginning to press with much force. Make up your mind; and don't come again till you have decided. Understand what that means. I can't see you again until you are ready to say Yes or No, finally—finally. Then come, and if you decide no, make it convenient before you come, to arrange any little matters that can best be put right personally. You may find obstacles afterwards. You understand?" and the look which accompanied the words shewed me that he meant all this as a pretty strong turn of the screw. "Oh, and by the by," he added, just as I was leaving the room—"of course you won't attempt to get away. You may if you like, you know, but you'll be wiser not to; because I have certain information about you, and any attempt at flight at such a juncture as this would give me an excellent excuse for dealing very summarily. Understand—I shall only

see you again when you are ready to give me your decision."

My anxiety for Olga was making me like a silly frightened boy; and I went away from the man now with a chilled feeling of fear that set me doubting and speculating and anticipating a thousand forms of trouble which he could inflict upon her. I should not have a moment's peace of mind while Olga remained in Russia. That was certain.

I went back to my rooms and sat there thinking out moodily the particulars of the journey which the girl had to take alone, and my fears for her multiplied with almost every turn of my thoughts. Every detail of the position seemed to teem with additional menace and cause for alarm.

I had my own escape to think of too. I resolved, let the risks be what they might, that the instant Olga's telegram came telling me she had crossed the frontier, I should bolt; and the manner and direction of my flight had cost me many an anxious hour.

I had been looking forward to the possible necessity for a hurried flight ever since I had started the venture, and I had had time thus to make my plans fairly complete. For this purpose I had used my Nihilist connection, though I had of course kept my whole plans to myself, since I had contemplated running away from the Nihilists as much as from anyone else.

The chief difficulty was the geographical position of Moscow: the very kernel of Russia, and at tremendous distances from all the frontiers. My escape must be obviously a matter of the most careful planning, seeing that I should probably be many weeks, and perhaps months, carrying it out. From the first I abandoned all thought of mak-

ing a dash straight for the frontier by train. Every outlet of the kind would be watched most jealously, alike by the police and the Nihilists: while the fact of Olga slipping through would increase a thousandfold the vigilance to prevent my following.

If Paula Tueski managed to get the permit, Olga would make her escape quickly by train, going either north-west to St. Petersburg and away by steamer: or west across the German frontier: or south-west down into Austria. Two days would do the business.

My escape was to be a very different affair.

I meant to leave Moscow on foot or pony back, disguised as a peasant woman, and as soon as I was well clear of the city, some 20 or 30 miles out, I intended to change that disguise and play the part of a horse-dealer, making for the two big horse fairs that were coming on soon at Rostov and Jaroslav—about 100 and 150 miles north respectively. For this purpose I proposed to buy up enough horses and ponies on my way to divert suspicion and sustain my part.

At Jaroslav I should sell these for what they would fetch and in the confusion of the fair time, change my character again. There I should strike the Volga: and my plan was to escape by river; working my way on the boats down to Tsaritsin and thence across by train to the Don. At the mouth of the Don, or at Taganrog, I calculated to be able to ship on a steamer across the Sea of Azov, and thence across the Black Sea, and out through the Bosphorus.

This was the outline, subject of course to any changes which necessity or expediency should suggest; and I preferred it, because if I could cut the trail between Moscow and the river, that was about

the very last place in which I should be looked for; while the time that must be occupied on the river would give me the necessary opportunity for obtaining such papers as I should require to get away.

I had perfected the plan, thought out many of its details and discounted its risks, and had laid in many of the necessary disguises. But I was not destined to use them; for the direction of matters was wrested out of my hands by a stroke that checkmated me completely.

In the afternoon a letter came to me from Olga, vaguely worded, to the effect that Paula Tueski had sent for her and had given her what had been promised, and that all matters were now complete. She wished me to see her at seven o'clock.

I scribbled a line saying I would be there at the time.

The messenger, Olga's maid, went off with it: and almost before I thought she could have had time to get home and back again, she came hurrying in again breathless and excited, and all white with fear.

I thought at first she had been molested in some way in the streets—Moscow is not Eden—and I asked her what was the matter.

The reply, uttered in gasps and jerks of terror and with spasmodic sobs filled me in my turn with consternation.

Olga had been arrested during the girl's absence, and my aunt, the Countess Palitzin was like a madwoman in her fear. She was all anxiety to see me.

"Arrested!" I cried, scarcely believing my own ears. "By whom? For what?"

"By the police; I don't know for what," wailed the girl. "But the Countess...."

"I'll go to her at once," I cried, interrupting

her; and without another word I set off at once for Olga's house, with the greatest haste.

What could it all mean?

Whose blow was this? Coming at such a moment, it shattered all my plans to fragments.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CRISIS.

I FOUND matters just as Olga's maid had told me. The Countess was in the deepest distress, and was wringing her hands and crying herself blind in agitation and alarm.

Olga had been out in the afternoon, she told me, and had come back considerably excited. She had stayed some time in her room, and the maid now said she had been turning over her clothes. I knew what this meant. Then she had written the letter to me and sent the girl with it; but the latter had scarcely left the house before the police had arrived, had asked for Olga, and had arrested her, refusing to say a single word as to the cause.

Olga had of course gone with them, protesting to the Countess that there must be some mistake and that no doubt she would soon be again at liberty and return home. When kissing her aunt the girl had whispered to her to tell me at once, with an assurance that she was not in the least frightened.

Knowing what I knew about the system of imprisonment in Russia and how common a thing it was for a prisoner to be arrested on the flimsiest suspicion, to enter a gaol and be kept from all communication with friends and family, I did not by any

means share the calmness she had professed. The suddenness of the arrest combined with the complete overthrow of all my plans incensed me beyond measure. I put to the two women all the questions that occurred to me, but got no further light. I could not hide my concern, but I did my best to make the Countess Palitzin believe that it would be in my power to help Olga.

I hurried from the house to Paula Tueski. I reckoned to get from her the best hints as to where my exertions could be most usefully exerted. But I did not find her and the news at her house was disconcerting somewhat. She had been called for suddenly and had gone out, leaving no word where she was to be found nor when she would return. All quite contrary to her usual custom.

I went on then to the chief police office. I was in uniform of course, and was received with the greatest politeness, but no information was given to me. The man who gave me an interview was complacency itself.

"I am grieved to be able to give you no information, Lieutenant," he said, politely. "But you know how our hands are tied and how one's lips are sealed in this office. In anything but that matter I am your most obedient servant: indeed, if in that very affair you can suggest how I can be of service, I pray you to command me."

"My sister was arrested by your men?" I asked.

"Most arrests are carried out by our men," was the reply.

"What is the charge against her?"

"I have not an idea."

"By whose orders was the arrest made?"

"By those of my superiors. I have but to obey."

"Where is she now?"

For answer he shrugged his shoulders, smiled blandly, and shook his head slowly.

"Can I see her?"

"Yes, of course—with an order."

"Whose order?"

"Anyone who is my superior."

"Can you give me an order?" He repeated his gesture, murmuring an expression of regret.

"You have not told me much," I said, and he smiled deprecatingly. "But it is enough to tell me where I must look for information."

His smile changed to one of congratulation, and, rising, he gave me his hand.

"Lieutenant, a brave man like you shall always command my sympathies and services so far as my duty permits," and with that official reservation he bowed me out with the most profuse of polite gestures.

I thought I saw from where the stroke came, and without any longer delay I hurried to the Prince Bilbassoff.

He was at first said to be out; and for some half hour I cooled my heels and warmed my temper and impatience striding up and down in front of the building. Then he was denied to me on the ground that he was very busily engaged; and only when I insisted that my business was exceptionally urgent and personal, was I admitted to an antechamber and left waiting there with some half dozen other.

The servant took my message, but instead of returning instantly, as had been my previous experience, to lead me at once to the Prince's room, I was left to fume in my impatience for several minutes.

I rang the bell angrily and when the servant came ordered him to shew me to the Prince instantly.

But he would not, saying he dared not without orders from his master, and that he had given my message and could do no more.

I augured ill from this reception, but was in no mood to brook delay. I had nothing to lose now by boldness, and as soon as the fellow had turned his back I went to the door which I knew to be that of the Prince's room, and pushing aside the man who stood on guard outside, knocked, opened it, and marched in unceremoniously.

The Prince was in close conference with a couple of men and when he saw me he jumped up and asked me how I dared to intrude in that way.

"I have something urgent and private to say to you," said I, coolly. "If these gentlemen will give us five minutes it will be enough."

A moment's reflection sufficed to change his anger to equanimity, forced or genuine, I didn't care which, and he dismissed the men.

"There can be only one reason why you come here," he said, as soon as we were alone, speaking in a very sharp tone.

"On the contrary there may be two," I replied, copying his sharpness.

"The only condition on which I can receive you, Lieutenant, is the one I told you some hours since. Have you come to comply with it?"

"I have come to ask you why you have arrested my sister and where she is."

"Arrested whom?" he asked, with a sharp look I didn't understand.

"My sister."

"Who is that?" This with a smile of indescribable meaning.

"You knew well enough when I was here this afternoon."

"On the contrary, I knew no more than I know now. I don't even know that you have a sister. Have you?"

Either the man was a lunatic, or he knew everything. Here was obviously the reason of the altered reception. But I would not betray myself by a single word or gesture.

"I am speaking of my sister, Olga Petrovitch, whom you rescued from the hands of Major Devinsky. Now, do you know what I mean?"

"No," he answered stolidly.

"Well, do you know whom I mean?"

"I know of Olga Petrovitch."

"Then what the devil do you mean?" I cried angrily. "You have arrested her, haven't you?"

"She has been arrested," he answered quietly.

"What for?"

"You seem very anxious on her account."

"Would you have a man indifferent when his sister is whisked off to gaol by the police devils of yours?"

"Indifferent? No, indeed; certainly not. Even I am not indifferent about it. It has been of the utmost use to me, in fact."

"How long are you going to keep up these riddles, Prince? I don't pretend to be your equal at that kind of fence, and as it's perfectly evident to me you think you have a knotted whip for my back I'll wait till you're ready to lay it on."

He laughed at that.

"Are you going to accept my conditions?" he asked.

"It will depend absolutely on the result of this interview."

He paused half a minute and then taking a paper from his pocket tossed it to me with a laugh.

"Here's the key. How do you read it?" he asked, lightly.

It was indeed the key, and the instant my eyes fell on it I saw everything.

It was the permit found on Olga.

The game was up; but I wouldn't play the craven.

I tossed it back to him and laughed, a more natural and mirthful laugh than his, though I scented death in the air.

"I understand it pretty well," I said, as lightly as he had spoken. "But if you don't mind I think I'll keep my own counsel."

"You know what it means?" he asked.

"To me?" He nodded. "I can guess," I said.

"And to her?"

"No, I don't know that. But I know your law is damned hard on women."

"And this Tueski woman—why did she get this permit for—your sister?" He paused on the word.

"Wanted her out of the way, that's all."

"Is what she says true—all true?"

"That depends on what she says."

"It's a strange tale. That you're not what you call yourself; that you've taken the place of Lieutenant Alexis Petrovitch; that you're a Nihilist of the Nihilists; that you murdered her husband; and that she has the proofs of all this."

"Why did you arrest her?" I asked, as an idea occurred to me.

"That," he said, pointing to the permit.

"Did she volunteer her statement?"

A laugh of diabolical cunning spread over his face.

"Yes—when she believed you had deceived her and had fled with—your sister. Boy, no one can

guard himself against a jealous Russian woman."

"Now, I see a little more clearly. But why did you arrest Olga Petrovitch?"

"Your visit to my sister this afternoon. You were too solicitous for the poor girl's nerves, and we thought it might be better for you to know that she was in safe guardianship until you had made your decision. There would at any rate be no pressing need for you to think of her leaving the country; or feel it desirable to go with her to take care of her in her shattered condition. And we were right. But even I did not expect a tithe of all that has come from the step. It is indeed seldom that I get so genuine a surprise."

"And what are you going to do—now?"

"How much of this woman's tale is true?"

"One third of it. I am not Alexis Petrovitch; but neither am I a Nihilist, nor a murderer."

"Who are you!"

"An Englishman—Hamylton Tregethner."

"But your speech—your accent—your Russian?"

"I was brought up in Moscow for the first sixteen years of my life."

"Tregethner, Hamylton Tregethner," he murmured, repeating the name as if it were not wholly unfamiliar to him. Then after a pause he asked me where the real Lieutenant Petrovitch was; and questioned me searchingly and very shrewdly as to the whole details of my change of identity. I concealed nothing.

"You English are devils," he said, when his questions were nearly exhausted. "I hate the lot of you—except you. And you're as big a devil as any of them. But you have the pluck of a hundred."

I shrugged my shoulders, laughed, lolled back in my chair and lighted a cigarette.

"I've enjoyed it," I said, "and that's the plain truth. I didn't like the lies I had to tell; but then I never had any training in the diplomatic service, and that makes the difference. But all the same I've enjoyed it; and what's more, if it had been possible, I'd have fought for the Little Father as keenly as any born Russ in the ranks. But it's over, and so far as I'm concerned, you can do what you like with me. I should like to save that girl. She's one in ten thousand for pluck. And you owe her something too, as she saved my life from a treacherous thrust of Devinsky's sword for you to take it. You might let her have her liberty in its place. It's infernally hard on the girl that her cowardly brute of a brother should let her in for all this mess; and then that I, with all the good will in the world, should thrust her deeper into the mud. It's damned hard!"

The Prince was watching me closely and thinking hard.

"Why did you hesitate to accept my proposal?" he asked, sharply.

"For a very plain reason. While I appreciated the honour and advantage of an alliance with your sister, I loved Olga Petrovitch, and preferred to marry her."

"I won't tell my sister that," he said, laughing sardonically. After a pause he added:—"How much does—your sister know of our matter?"

"Everything."

"Names?" and he stared as if to penetrate right into my brain.

"No—not of the man to be fought."

"On your honour?"

"On my honour."

"If she is released, will you go on with it?"

"If she is put across the frontier," I returned grimly.

"Don't you trust me?"

"You, yes; but your agents, no." He smiled.

"You should go far with the daring with which you push your fortunes."

"Probably I shall go on till my head falls by the wayside," I answered. I was utterly reckless now. But my tactics succeeded when nothing else could have won.

He took a form and wrote.

"Here is the permit for her to leave the country. It is yours—on conditions."

"What are they? Never mind what they are," I added, quickly. "I accept them in advance. Save that girl, who is innocent, and do what you like with me."

"Do you know what I ought to do with you?" he asked.

"Yes; better than you do. Write me a permit also and have me conducted to the frontier at the same time. But I don't know what you think you should do."

"I ought to write out a very different order and have you both sent straight to the Mallovitch yonder; and let things take their course."

"Well, it's fortunate for me then," I replied, with a laugh, "that your interest and your judgment pull different ways. You won't do that, Prince."

"How do I know that you are not a Nihilist?"

"Instinct, judgment, knowledge of men, knowledge of me—everything. Besides, if you want proof, no one knows better than yourself that a cipher telegram sent to London, and inquiries made in half a dozen places that I can mention, will put ample proofs in your hands to shew who I am.

So far as I know there's one man in Russia at the present moment and actually coming to Moscow, who'll stir up the British Legation and every British consulate in the country to the search for Hamylton Tregethner. That's the Hon. Rupert Balestier." Then I told him what had happened in Paris. At first he smiled, but soon grew thoughtful again.

"I warn you, too," I added, when he made no answer, "that if you chop my head off or stifle me in one of your infernal prisons, or send me packing to Siberia, Balestier is just the man to raise a devil of a clatter. And you don't want a row with our Foreign Office just at the moment when things are so ticklish with the Sick Man."

He waved his hand as if to put all such considerations away from him.

"If the girl you call your sister had got away, did you mean to try to escape?"

"Certainly I did," replied I, frankly, and I told him the scheme I had formed.

"And now?"

"If I give my word I shall keep it. You Russians never seem to think a man will keep his parole to his own disadvantage. We English think differently —and act as we think."

"If we postpone this talk till to-morrow, have I your word that you'll make no attempt to escape?"

"No, indeed, you haven't. Let this girl go at once; then you can have it and welcome."

"You seem to forget that I can keep you under guard?"

"I forget nothing of the kind. Clap me into a prison and you may whistle for anyone to carry out—to do what you wish. You can decide now, or lose the option. That's in the rules of a game like this."

"You carry things with a high hand," he cried angrily.

"Most probably I shouldn't be here if I didn't," said I, with a laugh. "It's my advantage to force the pace at this juncture; and the risk's too big to throw away a single chance."

He made no reply, but pushing back his chair got up and walked about the room, in a state of indecision absolutely foreign to his character and habits.

I knew how momentous the decision was. If I were the dangerous Nihilist that Paula Tueski had declared, the risk of letting me free and entrusting to me such a task as that we had discussed was critical and deadly. The Russian instinct was to clap me into a gaol and be done with me; but the personal feeling pulled him in the other direction—to use me for a tool in the project that was all in all to him. With the Grand Duke once out of his path there was nothing between him and almost absolute rule.

I watched him with an anxiety he little suspected, for my manner was studiously careless, indifferent, and reckless.

"Did you give this girl any particular task if she escaped?" he asked, stopping suddenly in his walk close to me.

"Certainly; to find Rupert Balestier, tell him of my position, and get him to try and smooth away the difficulties. I had also arranged how she could communicate with and find me if I managed to get away."

He took the answer as I gave it with perfect frankness, and it seemed to help his decision. He resumed his pacing backwards and forwards.

Two or three minutes later he stopped his walk

and taking the permit he had written held it out to me.

"Will you give me your word as an English gentleman that if I give you this and allow the girl to leave Russia, you will make no attempt to escape, and will go on with the proposal we have discussed?"

It was my turn to hesitate now.

"No, I cannot," I said after a moment's thought. "An Englishman cannot lend himself out as an assassin, Prince Bilbassoff. I will do this. I will give you my word of honour not to attempt to leave Russia, and if a meeting between the Grand Duke and myself can be arranged without dishonour to me, I pledge myself to meet him. I will never take that word back unless you release me; but more I cannot do. Let Olga Petrovitch go, and you shall do as you will with me."

"I take your word," he said, quietly. "Your identity will remain unknown. Your sister will leave for the frontier under escort at midnight. You can take the news to her, and she can leave with you to make her arrangements for departure. I hold you responsible for her; and you will explain only what is necessary to her. You remain a Russian."

And with the permit and the order for her instant release in my hand I left him, conscious that I had been brushing my back against a dungeon door the whole time and had only just escaped finding myself on the wrong side of it.

CHAPTER XXV.

COILS THAT NO MAN COULD BREAK.

Poor Olga! I shall not easily forget the effect the news had on her.

I went out from the interview impregnated with the conviction that I was now indeed hopelessly baffled. I saw how completely the whole position had been changed. The very axis had shifted. And the knowledge that I had to make Olga understand it all before she left Russia was more unpalatable and depressing than I can describe.

Up to the present moment there had indeed been the slight off-chance that we should both escape, and the knowledge that if we could only do so, we might find happiness in another country. But that hope was as dead as a coffin nail. I was bound to Moscow by a shackle more powerful than iron fetters. I had pledged myself not to attempt to go until the Prince himself had given me permission; and I knew that he would never think of doing this until the duel had been in some way arranged. On the other hand the Nihilist attack on the Emperor was to be made in two days' time. If it succeeded an ignominious death at the hands of the law could be the only result for me; while if it failed, death was almost as certain at the hands of the

Nihilists who would adjudge me their betrayer.

Between the upper and nether millstones I was helpless; certain only of being crushed by them. Thus nothing could make me believe that I should ever again set eyes on the woman whose release I had thus secured and whom I now loved with all my heart.

Nor could I part from her without allowing her to see something of this.

She was indeed so quick to appreciate the meaning of what I told her, that all the sweet pleasure and gladness she shewed when welcoming me changed in a moment to sadness.

"I would ten thousand times rather not go," she said. "I do not care what they do to me. I have brought you into this, and it is me they should punish," she said more than once.

"But you can't do what this man wants, Olga," said I with a smile, to reassure her. "If you could, he would probably let me go and hold on to you. If I couldn't, he would hold on to us both. But you must go for this reason. You must find Balestier and tell him to come here. He must stop making a fuss about Hamylton Tregethner, and just come on here and see me and let us try together to find out some solution of the puzzle. But he must hold his tongue unless talking to the right pair of ears."

"I shall know no rest till I find him," replied Olga instantly. "And if I do not, I shall come back here. I will not leave you like this."

I kissed her; but did not tell her that so far as I was concerned her return would be useless, for the cogent reason that I should not be alive. It was impossible that I could survive by many hours the Imperial visit. This I kept from her, however,

for the farewell was already more than sufficiently sad and trying; and I doubt if any consideration on earth would have induced her to leave if she had really known how imminent was my danger.

I talked much indeed of the help Balestier might be able to render, and thus impressed on her strongly the need for her to find him, however long it might take her. This giving her a task and connecting it with the work of helping me, kept her hope alive and tended to reconcile her to the parting, so that in the end she shook off much of her depression. I could see also she was battling with her feelings to distress me as little as possible.

I loved her the more as I saw this, but the parting was such pain for us both, that I was glad when it was over. I stood and watched the train steam out of the station and saw her leaning from the carriage window to catch the last glimpse of me. And I was sad indeed, as I turned away with a positively choking sense of loneliness such as I had never felt before in all my life.

The departure of my brave little sister, clever-witted counsellor, and dearest companion seemed to leave such a void in my life that in the first hours which followed her departure I mourned for her as one grieves for the dead. And in truth she was dead to me.

But the events of the day following left me little time for meditation. It was Sunday and a day of brisk action. Early in the morning there were special regimental duties; and on my return to my rooms for breakfast I found waiting for me a stranger, whose card, given to my servant, described him as "J. W. Junker, St Petersburg Gazette."

He rose at my entrance and said in a very pleasant voice:—

"Excuse a journalist's liberty in coming to you. I am the special correspondent of the St Petersburg Gazette and have come to do the Czar's visit, and I should very much like a word with you on the matter."

"I don't see where I can be of any help, but if there's anything I can tell you, fire away," I said. "I've had a couple of hours' drill this morning, however, and I have to be on the parade ground in less than an hour, so you must excuse me if I have my breakfast while we chat. But perhaps you'll join me?"

"With the greatest pleasure," and down he sat, and while the servant was in the room for the first few minutes, he chatted away like the bright and pleasant fellow he appeared to be. But as soon as my man had left the room, his manner changed suddenly and his voice took a direct earnest tone that made me look at him in some astonishment.

"Don't have that fellow back again. Is it all acting, or don't you really recognise me? I knew you in a moment."

"Did you? Well, I certainly don't know you. I never met a journalist...." He broke in with a short laugh and waved his hand with a quick gesture of imperative impatience as he stared at me hard. His manner annoyed me.

"Well, if you're not what you said you were, what the devil are you doing here? What do you want?" I felt like pitching him out of the place.

"Didn't you expect me?"

"Expect you? No; how should I?"

"Instructions were sent to prepare you."

"I can only say I haven't the ghost of a notion what you want."

"To complete the arrangements for to-morrow's

glorious event," and his face lighted with a momentary enthusiasm.

"How am I to know you?" I asked, suspiciously.

"I am Gorvas Lassthum; and I saw you twelve months ago when the other plan was laid, as you will remember, and failed. Your memory is treacherous, my friend."

"There are some things I train it to forget," I answered, equivocally.

I was in a fix. I guessed the man was a Nihilist agent, of course, and his air of self-importance suggested that he was high up in the leadership. But on the other hand Moscow was at the moment swarming with spies of all kinds; and this might be one. I assumed an air of extreme caution therefore, and after a flash of thought added: "And some that I prefer not to know at all. It pleases me now to hold that from my side you and I are strangers. You know me well; say then just what you wish to say. I on my side don't know you, and prefer to say nothing."

"Good," he cried; and reaching out offered me his hand and when I gave him mine, he pressed it and said earnestly:—"Would God we had more men like you—so ready in act and so cautious in word."

I bowed and made no other sign.

"You have the orders for the disposition of the troops to-morrow, and at the last minute the whole of them, or the most of them, will be changed. You yourself will be detailed to guard that part of the line which runs over the flat stretch by the river on the further side of the Vsatesk station. Guard it well; for a greater life than that of the Emperor depends on your vigilance—the life of the People."

As he said this another of those little flashes of light that seemed to transform him from a pleasant man of the world into an enthusiast leapt into his eyes. A pause followed in which I said nothing.

"Your orders will be to station your men at set distances on either side of the line—it being an easy place to guard—and you will have some three miles of the line under your command. It is good. Now, take thought. At one point in about the centre of your section, the land dips and the line is embanked to a height of some ten feet, for a length of about half a mile. At that spot there are four alder trees —three to the left of the line, and one to the right. These three form an irregular triangle, one side of which is much shorter than the others; and if you follow the short line which those two trees make, you will find that they form a comparatively straight line with the fourth tree on the other side of the railway embankment. Do you follow me?"

He made a rough model on the table-cloth, using some of the breakfast things for the purpose of shewing the positions of the railway and the trees.

"No one can mistake that," I said.

"Well, you are to take up your position here, you yourself, I mean, here, in a dead straight line between these two trees"—demonstrating them on the table-cloth—"for this is where there will be an accident. And now, pay close heed to this. You will go out by train; and when your men are paraded at the station they will be joined by five of ours. These will mingle with yours at the very last moment; and if any questions are asked they will produce the necessary authority. These five men you will arrange carefully to take the next five positions to you on your right hand. When the train leaves the line, they will instantly close

round and guard the Emperor's carriage; and you will see that nothing prevents them. That is all you have to do; and if you act discreetly you will run no risk. You will not fail. They know their duties and will do them; and will let no one come between them and their noble task. Five bolder men do not breathe in all Russia. Remember, they are to be stationed next to you on your right. You understand?"

"Every item."

"It is a great day for you, friend," he said.

"It is a great day for Russia," I returned; and soon after he left me.

I was filled with the most anxious doubt as to what course I ought to take to checkmate this horrible plot, of which I was the most unwilling depository and was marked out as the forced agent.

During the whole day I was turning the problem over and over in my thoughts: and I could see no course that would be at all effective in thwarting the plot without at the same time exposing myself to all the hazard of being punished as a Nihilist. I could, of course, tell the police or Prince Bilbassoff, but this meant a double danger for me. They would take measures to alter the arrangements as to the visit; the reason for this would have to be told to the Czar; it would certainly leak out to the Nihilists, and I should be a mark for their assassins at once. On the other hand the story told by Paula Tueski would seem to have the corroboration which my acquaintance with Nihilist matters would give to it, and I should be in peril there.

One consideration there was that gave some reassurance. I had already had the orders for the distribution of the troops, and I knew that I was to be miles away from those cursed alder trees at

the moment when the Czar would be passing. I knew too that if the plot went wrong in that main feature, it would fail altogether.

The Nihilists were not such fools as to draw down on themselves all the sensational punishments which would inevitably follow the discovery of an organised attempt on the life of the Czar, for the mere empty purpose of sending the Imperial train off the line. Unless therefore, they had some emissary so highly placed as to be in possession of the information long before any of us in Moscow knew about it, the whole machinery was likely to be stopped for the one flaw. And though I had had some proofs of the extraordinary accuracy of their information, I could not believe their power to be such as this necessitated.

But in the afternoon, when according to arrangement I went again to the Prince Bilbassoff, startling news awaited me, that redoubled all these doubts and difficulties, and set them buzzing and rushing through my brain, threatening to muddle my wits altogether.

There was a distinct change in the manner of his reception of me, and it pleased me to set this down to the fact that his opinion of me was raised by the knowledge that the black past of Alexis Petrovitch was mine only by adoption, and that in reality I had the clean antecedents of an English gentleman.

"I can't give you more than a few minutes," he said, "and I must therefore squeeze as much as possible into them. I have taken your suggestion and have wired to London to find out about you. The result is what I am bound to say I hoped; and the consequences are I am going to trust you."

"That's as you please," said I, quietly.

"It does please me, because I don't want this duel to fall through. Now you want some cause for fighting that will satisfy your honour. Will you fight this man if he insults you?"

"I'll fight any man who does that," I replied.

"Now, whose officer are you?"

"The Czar's, while I am in Russia."

"Will you risk your life in his service?"

"My sword is absolutely at his service."

"If you should hear His Majesty insulted in your presence would you face the man who did it?"

"As surely as effect follows cause."

"Then this man's whole life is an insult to the Czar."

"In what way?"

"He is a Nihilist to his finger-tips. His presence near the throne is a standing menace to the Emperor; his hand is ever raised to seek his Majesty's life; and his whole life is that of a traitor who learns the highest secrets only to betray them to these enemies of God and the Emperor."

"What proof have you?" I asked in the profoundest astonishment. I began to see now how the most secret information leaked out.

"None, boy. Or do you think he would be where he is for an hour?"

"Then how do you know it?"

"If a secret is known to three people, two of whom you know to be as staunch as steel, and yet it gets out—how do you think it happens? If this happens not only once but two or three times, what do you think of the man? This man is a traitor; and as surely as there is a God in Heaven, the Crown is not firmly on my master's head while the man remains alive. Now, will you fight him?"

"The matter is a public, not personal, one: Russian

not English. My sword is not a bravo's to be hired for that sort of work."

He swore a deep oath under his breath at this, and then changed it to a laugh with an ugly ring in it.

"If you mean to climb, my young cockerel, we must see more of your spurs and hear less of your scruples. Personal! Good God, what more do you want? Aren't you the Emperor's own property? Isn't the Little Father in danger? Isn't that enough? Personal! Ugh. Well, is this personal enough for you? His Highness has already done you the honour to pick you out for the favour of his ill will. This is a letter which by one of those little accidents that do sometimes happen in my office, has fallen into my hands. He is writing to an agent of his here in Moscow. Listen: 'There is a young lieutenant of the Moscow Infantry Regiment, named Petrovitch, about whom I want all the possible information. He is a dishonourable scoundrel, I understand—a dicing, gambling, drinking fellow, who thinks he can crow and strut on the crest of his dunghill with impunity because he had the luck to beat a better man than himself in a duel, and the insolence to insult another officer—one of my friends—and then hide himself under official protection. I hear now that he is meditating another and a greater coup. I know much about him, but want you to get me as much more information as possible. Such swash-buckling knaves are a disgrace and danger to everything they touch. He is not to be trusted in anything and all reasons make his overthrow necessary.'"

As he finished reading the extract, the Prince paused and lowering the letter looked at me over the top. Then without giving me time to answer, he continued:—

"Your 'butcher Durescq' was this man's close friend and tool—doing his work for him. It was through this patron's influence that Durescq escaped being turned out of the army altogether. Now, you can see two things—why this man hates you, and how it was I heard of you. Is that personal enough, Lieutenant?"

"By God, I should think it is," cried I, on fire with rage. "What does he dare to interfere with me for?" As I asked the question the reason flashed upon me as by inspiration. He had heard of my being associated with Prince Bilbassoff and was afraid that as I knew so much about Nihilism, I should get to learn of his connection with it, and he thus deemed it best to have me put out of the way. He meant to have me "removed." When I looked up, the Prince's keen subtle eyes were fixed on me with calculating intentness.

"It is curious that this man should fix on you as the object of his resentment—even though he is a Nihilist. Take care, my friend. I know you have inherited a Nihilist black cloak and dagger with your other undesirable possessions; beware how you use them."

"I believe the real Alexis had dealings with them," I said.

"If this Tueski woman manages to let them understand the truth, then, you will need the wariest wits in the world to avoid stumbling.

"You have maddened me," I cried, as if impetuously, and in the highest excitement. "Get me a meeting with that villain and were he twenty times the swordsman he is, and covered in iron mail from head to foot, my sword should find a chink to let the life out of him. I am on fire."

Then I rushed away; for in truth I dared not

stay to be any longer questioned about my relations with the Nihilists.

It all seemed clear to me now. They meant to use me for the horrible business of the following day; and then under some pretext get rid of me —murder me if necessary—or denounce me. This man held that I knew too much for his safety.

All this was supposing, of course, that I escaped the danger of the plot itself.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MY DECISION.

THE news I heard from Prince Bilbassoff wrought me to a higher pitch of excitement than anything that had ever happened in my life. I was in a very highly strung condition, and my nerves were no doubt greatly wrought upon as the result of the stirring events of the previous few days. That may have rendered me unduly susceptible to this new development.

Be that as it may, I went out of the Prince's presence filled with a spurring desire to kill the man who as it seemed to me was planning my ruin in this most treacherous manner.

The view I took was that this Grand Duke was moved by the double motive of personal anger on the score of my affair with Alexandre Durescq and of a feeling of insecurity on account of the knowledge I had of his Nihilism. I knew too much to be trusted. The issues were so tremendous, the decision I had to make so full of moment, and the time for me to choose my course so short, that my wits had need to be at their sharpest.

I had out my horse and went for a hard gallop —one of the best prescriptions I know of to clear a tangled judgment. It acted now. As I rode at

hot speed my thoughts began to settle; and then gradually a scheme occurred to me, wild, desperate, and hazardous at best, and fraught with fearful risks to others beside myself; but yet if successful, offering me what I wanted above all—complete deliverance from the whole of my present difficulties.

My first thought in all was for myself. Not for the Emperor, nor the army, nor Russia, nor any big interests—for myself and for my escape from the country whose most unwilling guest and compulsory servant I was. Had I been a Russian officer in reality, I could have taken but one course—disclosed the Nihilist plot, or so much of it as I knew, and thus have checkmated the whole devilish business at once. Had I ever received any particular mark of favour at the hands of the Government or the country, gratitude would have urged me to take the same course.

But I owed nothing to a soul in all Russia. Everyone had tried to use me as a tool. The Colonel of the regiment had begun by making use of my quarrel with Durescq to humiliate Devinsky. The officers, almost without exception, had swaggered over me contemptuously until my skill as a swordsman shewed them the price of contempt might be death. The Nihilists had first tried to assassinate me, and only when I had seemed to serve their ends with more daring and secrecy than any other man among them, had they turned with a demand for more sacrifices; while this Grand Duke, apparently one of the chief of them, was even now planning to get rid of me. Prince Bilbassoff was in the same list; and without a doubt would have shut up both Olga and myself on Paula Tueski's accusation, had he not wished to hire me as an assassin. Everywhere I turned it was the same.

What then did I owe to Russia that I should think of any single consideration except my own safety and welfare?

The question which I asked myself therefore, was whether I could plunge my hand into this seething cauldron of intrigue and murder and pluck out my own safety.

A word from me would foil the whole Nihilist plot, and the Czar would make his entry into Moscow in due form and time. But how should I profit? Supposing the Nihilist calculations were correct, and I was appointed to the section of the line where the "accident" was to happen, I should have to contrive obstacles and make difficulties which would in all probability draw down on me the suspicions of the whole Nihilist crew. Add that element of suspicion to the feeling which the Grand Duke already entertained and was inculcating into others, and what chance was there of my escaping either open ruin or assassination?

Assuming that I did escape even, what should I gain? I was tied to Russia by the word I had passed to the Prince, and could not hope to be set free from it until I had either fought the Grand Duke, or until the Prince was convinced that the duel was impossible. But as the Duke looked on me as nothing less than a pestilential traitor to the Nihilist cause, was it likely that he would consent to meet me? Certainly not. Even if we added the cause which the Prince had suggested—the spurious betrothal to the Princess—I should get no benefit. The Grand Duke would merely regard that as an additional reason for having me removed secretly from his path.

All this meant therefore, that even if I thwarted the plot in this way, I should be kept in Russia

and apart from Olga, until the Grand Duke consented to fight me; or, in other words, until his emissaries had convinced themselves that they could not manage to assassinate me. Nor was it probable that that conviction would come until they had made a series of unsuccessful efforts.

A pleasant prospect, truly!

On the other hand, if I did nothing and allowed the infernal plot to be carried through and the Emperor murdered, it would mean death to me; certain death. As the officer placed in charge of the section of the line where the deed would be done, who had allowed the murderers disguised as soldiers to mix with my troops; who had actually posted them at the very spot where the train was to be derailed; and who above all was already suspected of Nihilist intrigue; I was certain of conviction, even without the Grand Duke's special animosity. Add that, however, and the result was as dead certain as that night alternates with day.

If I was to escape, therefore, it must be by a shrewd stroke dealt by myself alone and for myself alone. And such a stroke it was that suggested itself in the course of that ride.

Briefly, it was to allow everything to go forward right to the very supreme moment, and then by personal effort to save the Emperor's life by my own hand in such a way as to draw the Imperial attention directly on myself.

I thought I saw how it could be done: and when I turned my horse's head homeward I rode at a slower pace, meditating all the details of the plan with the closest attention. The Nihilists had told me enough to shew me how to act; and my sense of fair play urged me to use the knowledge for my sole advantage, and without involving a single

Nihilist in danger by open denunciation. I was a Nihilist against my will; and though I had been forced into the plot, I was altogether opposed to telling what had been told to me in this spirit of confidence. At the same time I was a Russian officer, almost equally against my own seeking, and so long as I preserved the Emperor's life I need not regard other matters as a Russian officer would.

By the time I reached my rooms I had my plans shaped, and my scheme developed; and my accustomed mood of calm, wary self-possession had returned.

I changed and went to the club. The place was crammed with the officers stationed in Moscow and their friends who had been sent into the city on special duty in connection with the Czar's visit on the following day. Everyone was in the noisiest spirits. Good news had come of the prospects of war. All believed that on the next day the Little Father would make a ringing war speech that would render peace impossible; and many of the men were talking as though the sword had already leapt from the scabbard, and a million men, tramping warwards, were already driving the scared Turks before them, like husks before the winnowing fan.

I lounged about the place, exchanging a word now and then with one or another of my acquaintances, and I saw some of the youngsters stop their war babble as I passed and whisper to their companions, and the latter would turn and look in my direction. I was fool enough to be pleased at these little indications of the changed feelings with which in scarcely more than a month I had made my fellow-officers think and speak of "that devil Alexis."

More than once I smiled to myself as I thought what a bomb-shell would be exploded in the room if they were all told the hazardous secret which filled my thoughts just at that moment.

"To hell with the Turk, Alexis," cried Essaieff, catching sight of me and stopping me as I moved past.

"May the Sick Man never recover!" I returned, answering in the form that was then in vogue with us all.

"Drink, man, drink," he cried, excitedly, thrusting a glass of some kind of liquor to me. It was evident he had been toasting the war pretty freely. "Sit here with us. Take it easy, man, now while we can. We've a long march ahead before we catch a glimpse of the minarets of Constantinople. Gentlemen, here is a Russian of whom you will hear much when the war comes. Lieutenant Petrovitch of ours, gentlemen, my particular friend, and as good a fellow as ever held a commission. You can do anything with him, except quarrel; then, damme, you must look out for yourself, for there isn't a man in Moscow, nor I believe in Russia, can get through his guard; and as for shooting, God! I believe if a single devil of a Turk shews only the shadow of an eyelash round the corner of a fortification, he'll hit him with a ricochet. 'That devil Alexis,' he is to us; and if the devil's only half as good a fellow as this, I'll be content for one to serve him."

"I've heard of Lieutenant Petrovitch," said one of the men, as he bowed to me ceremoniously and lifted his glass in response to Essaieff's toast.

"Then you will know how to discount the exaggerations of my good friend Essaieff," said I, quietly.

"On the contrary, I knew Durescq."

"Is Lieutenant Petrovitch the officer who was in that matter?" asked another, shewing great interest in me at once.

"I should think he is," cried Essaieff, noisily enthusiastic. "It was in this very room that the thing occurred. I'll tell you...."

"Essaieff, my dear fellow, I'd much rather not," I interrupted; and turning to one of the officers I asked:—"Do you really think the war will come now?" But Essaieff would not let me change the subject.

"War come? of course it will; but this is something much better than war just now," he burst in. "Several of us thought there was mischief in the air when we saw Devinsky and Durescq together, and I was standing there, waiting for...."

"Excuse me," I interrupted, rising. "I wish to speak to a man I see over there; and really I can't stand Essaieff when he gets on this theme," and with that excuse I left.

Wherever I went there were the same signs of revelry, excitement and pleasure. All were anticipating a really splendid gala day on the morrow, with gaieties, festivities, balls, receptions, concerts, levees, everything that society deems life worth living for to follow.

I went away very early. I had to keep my nerves as firm as cold steel, and the noisy ruffled atmosphere of this place with its crowd of gesticulating, laughing, excited men, and the drink that was circulating so freely, formed the worst of all preparations for such a day as the morrow would be for me and the task I had to perform.

Before going home I strolled through one or two of the broader streets; and everywhere I went I

could not fail to observe that while the unusual throngs of people in the streets reflected the feelings of rejoicing that had animated the officers whom I had just left, and that all Moscow was slowly going mad with anticipative excitement, the number of police agents was multiplied many times over. The leaven of suspicion embittered everything; and, as no one knew better than I, with what terrible cause.

As I mingled with the great, jostling, bantering crowd I found myself speculating how the majority of them would decide such an issue as that which had been bewildering me; and the wild task I had for the morrow made me feel like a thing apart from everyone of them—an alien not only in race, but in every attribute and aspiration.

The contact with the crowd helped in a way to strengthen the decision I had made. I was one against all these thousands; fighting by myself for my own hand against desperate odds, and with none to help me in a single detail.

When I reached my rooms I went at once to bed, knowing that every minute of rest had its value as a preparation for the work of the following day. I had made my resolution, formed my plans, thought out even the details. I had gauged the risk and knew full well that the probabilities were all against my being alive on the following night.

But this at least was equally certain—if I lived and was free I would have won my way out of Russia.

These were the thoughts that filled me; and so occupied was I with them that it was not until I purposely put them away from me in order to get to sleep, that I recalled how little I had thought of Olga during the whole of that eventful day.

She was in my thoughts when I fell asleep, however: and her face cheered me in my dreams.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FOUR ALDER TREES.

I WAS up very early on the morning of the Czar's visit. We had a parade at 6.30 to receive final instructions; and as I walked to the barracks I was in high spirits, buoyant, self-confident, and alert—much as I had felt on the morning of my duel with Devinsky. I could not have been in better tone.

The morning air was very fresh and clear and the sunlight fell everywhere upon flags, decorations, triumphal arches, and the rest of the festal preparations for the great holiday to which work people were busy putting the final touches.

Everybody seemed in the highest spirits. Laughter and jest and a pleasant interchange of greetings rang on the air on all sides of me; and the whole city seemed to be already wreathed in smiles.

My brother officers came straggling up after I had reached the ground, and more than one of them shewed abundant signs of the previous night's carouse; looking as though a couple more hours' sleep were sadly wanted. Headaches abounded among them, and more than one regarded me with a sort of comical envy because I was not dull-eyed, pale, nor unrested. They took it for granted

that I had drunk as deeply as they, and set down my steady head as one more proof of my prowess. Some men can always see something of a hero in the man who can drink heavily and yet shew no signs of his dissipation.

When the Colonel came and we fell in, there was a disappointment for me. My new plan was based on the correctness of the Nihilist information —that I should have the command of the troops guarding the section of the line where were four alder trees; and I reckoned confidently upon hearing from the Colonel of the alteration in the original plans.

But no announcement of the sort was made. On the contrary, as soon as the troops had fallen in, the arrangements which had been announced on the previous day were repeated; and I found that instead of being told off to take charge of the railway to the north of the city, I had to pass the whole day in guarding the Western Gate and the road for some distance on either side of it. I was ordered to parade my men at eight o'clock and to march straight to the place of guard.

I went home to breakfast, disappointed and disgusted. I didn't care a jot about missing the sight-seeing, but I was angry that the plan on which I had now set my heart had failed; and that instead of being able to strike a vigorous blow for my own freedom I should have to pass the hours dawdling about doing nothing more than a sort of police work in keeping order among a crowd of gaping, staring, gawky, country yokels.

I was in an exceedingly ill temper therefore when I returned to the parade ground to start on my most unwelcome and unpalatable task.

But I found the whole place in complete confusion

and uproar, and the first words I heard were that the whole plan of the day's work had been altered; that the troops had been changed and interchanged in a most perplexing manner; that regiments and companies and even odd files of men had been mixed up in the greatest apparent confusion; and that not one of the original commands remained unaltered.

I hurried to the Colonel for my orders, and found him cursing volubly and with tremendous energy at the infinite confusion the alterations had caused. But he found me my orders readily—he was a splendid disciplinarian—and when I read them I marvelled indeed at the extraordinary exactness with which the Nihilists had been able to anticipate matters.

My command was changed to the guarding of the three mile stretch of line outside the Vsatesk station, commencing a thousand yards to the north of that point. I was to train out at once; post my men at 25 yards distance; and allow no one to approach the line for two hours before the coming of the Imperial train, and until half an hour after it had passed; the time of its passing being given confidentially as 2.45—two hours later than had been originally fixed for the actual arrival in Moscow. More than that, the men under my command were not to be drawn solely from my own regiment, but from no less than three others, all specified, who were to meet me at the station.

As I read these instructions I saw in them the influence of someone who must be both near to the Throne and intimately acquainted with the whole Nihilist plot. The object of classing together under one command men taken suddenly from different regiments was a master-stroke of treachery for this particular work. Apparently it prevented any collusion among any disaffected regiments, but in reality

it opened the way for the five assassins to get into the ranks without the least suspicion; while the meeting at the railway station, probably urged as a necessity to save time at the moment when the plans had been all changed, must have been in fact designed solely for the purpose of the plot.

He who was secretly behind all this was no ordinary man. That was clear. And I saw that in pitting my wits against his, seeing that he already had the Imperial ear, I should have to be wary indeed, if I wished to avoid a fall. But I did not shirk the contest: and now that I knew I was really to have the chance, I clenched my teeth in desperate resolve.

After incalculable trouble and much irritating delay, I got together the small company that came from my own regiment and marched them to the railway station. I halted them and looked round for the detachments that were to join me. I posted my men in a place that would lend itself well to the Nihilists joining them. The three detachments of men reported soon after my arrival, each in charge of a sergeant; and when I had ascertained the train by which we were to travel—a matter of no small difficulty in the indescribable confusion that prevailed, I moved the whole two hundred to the platforms.

I had seen nothing of the Nihilists, so far, and this caused me some surprise. But on the platforms the order of the ranks could not be maintained and when about half of my command were entrained, I was addressed by one of a file of five men who reported that he and his comrades had been told off to accompany me; and he produced written instructions to that effect.

I glanced at the order and saw that it was sufficiently in form to enable me to take the men

with me, and while pretending to study the paper I looked searchingly at each of the men. They were a daredevil set, in all truth, but they stood in their uniforms with as much military air as the average Russian rankers.

I assumed an air of great vexation, and rapping out an oath, loud enough for all about me to hear, I called up the sergeant of my own regiment and telling him the men had been sent to join me, and cursing them and everybody in general for the interruption, told him to find places in the train for them. In this way everything went smoothly, and we were soon gliding out of Moscow for the short run, while I sat back alone in the first-class compartment which I had had reserved for myself.

I had still some slight preparations to make, and wished to be alone to think. First I examined my arms carefully. I looked to every chamber of my revolver. Each bullet might mean a life before the day was three hours older. Next, I looked to my sword. It was the same that had seen me through my trouble with Devinsky and I knew it as a man learns to know the feel of his walking stick. Lastly, I had a long deadly looking dagger; the sheath fastened to the right hip of my trousers where it could be drawn with the greatest ease. As a final reserve I had in a small secret pocket a couple of pills—poison enough to kill half a dozen men. I meant to make a quick end of things if they went wrong with me.

Satisfied that everything was in order, I lay back and mapped out again the exact disposition of the men in my charge: and the precise course I meant to take at the critical moment. I was still occupied in this when the train drew up at the little station, Vsatesk; and in less than half an hour later, I had

reached my section and begun to post my men and was looking about me for the four alder trees and the exact spot where I had been warned to take my post.

Knowing what I did about the Nihilist intentions, it was obviously unnecessary to pay much heed to any part of the line except that where I knew the "accident" would happen. So I sent out a couple of sergeants to dispose the men on that part of the line which lay to the north of the four trees.

These were easily found, and I carried out to the letter the Nihilist instructions to post the five men who were to kill the Czar, immediately to the right, or south, of the line formed by the three trees as described to me.

I did this for the simple reason that it was my cue to deceive everyone right up to the last moment. Had I altered the disposition of these men they would have known that I meant treachery to them and to the cause; and what the consequences would have been it was impossible to foresee. As it was they took their places with a grim readiness, and a significant glance that spoke to me eloquently.

As soon as all the troops were placed I took my own position and, girding up my patience to wait for the coming of the Imperial train and with it my opportunity, I scanned every inch of the line for some evidence of the Nihilists' preparations. I could not detect a sign of any change in the road or of any preparation of any kind. The track was not very well laid, and in several spots it bore signs of recent repairs; but beyond that there was nothing. This fact may have helped to conceal the work of the Nihilists, of course; but although I knew almost the very spot where it had been carried out, I could detect nothing.

The suppense was trying indeed; and while I was waiting, it was natural enough, perhaps, that my imagination should be chiefly busy in suggesting many reasons why I was almost bound to fail in my desperate venture.

I did not know in which train the Emperor would travel. I knew of course that there would be first the pilot engine; there would also be the baggage train; probably also a special train for the suite and servants; and the Imperial train. But this might be first second, or third of the three. I had not been told as to this. So far as my Nihilist work was concerned, it was not necessary that I should know it. That work began when the train had left the line; and I had been posted near where that must happen. I concluded therefore, that I had not been trusted with a single jot more of information than it was deemed necessary for me to have.

I should have to depend upon the Nihilists who were to move the lever being accurately informed on this point. But this troubled me. If the worst happened, of course the "accident" must take place and the train be sent off the line, and I must use my opportunity then. What I wished to do was to stop the train in which the Emperor would travel; but if I did not know which that was, I might easily make an ugly blunder that would expose me to danger from the Nihilists and not only do me no good with the Court, but mark me out as an object for ridicule and suspicion.

This uncertainty did not present itself to disturb me until I was actually on the line waiting for the coming of the trains, and face to face with the necessity for action.

The point where I stood was about a mile and a half to the north of the station and the line was so

dead straight, that it could be watched for five or six miles farther north, and I should thus have ample notice of the approach of the trains. It was a very clear day moreover; and as my sight was exceedingly keen and good, I knew I should be able to catch the earliest glimpse of the trains whose passing meant so much to me.

I managed to get the whole of the company under my command posted more than two hours before the Emperor was timed to pass; and after I had made a show of inspecting those who were guarding that part of the section which I knew to be outside the sphere of danger, I did the work very thoroughly with those who were in that part where the grim, hazardous drama was to be played.

I had been careful to keep the men of my own regiment close to me and on both sides of the five Nihilist spies; and I was glad to see that many of them were among my staunchest admirers. They would have followed me to death without a word; and the sergeant, whose name was Grostef, the most athletic fellow in the ranks, was my sworn champion, on the ground that I was the only man in the regiment who could outrun, and outjump him, and beat him with any weapon he liked to pick. I believe the fellow loved me for my strength and skill.

The time dragged a bit for the patient fellows on guard who were not near enough to exchange a word without the sergeants being pretty sure to hear it; and the eyes of all soon began to be cast longingly northward in impatient desire to catch a glimpse of the trains. Almost the only men who shewed no signs of feeling were the five to whom the coming of the train meant, as they knew and were content to know, the coming of death also.

They stood like stone figures: impassive, immovable and stern: the type of men to whom death in the cause of duty is welcome.

An hour before the time, I took up my position finally exactly in the line of the three alder trees, and resolved not to move again nor to have my attention drawn away from the rails until the work was over; and I only lifted my eyes now and then from the track to send a sharp, quick glance along the line to see if the train were yet in sight.

The first intimation I had that the trains were getting near came from the opposite direction. Between us and the Vsatesk station about half a mile distant, was a signal box, and the light wind which was blowing from the south carried to my ears the sharp smack of the signal arm as it fell from the danger point, and signalled the line all clear.

I knew then it was a matter of minutes. My pulse began to quicken up slightly; and my scrutiny of the track and rails increased in intentness. But the minutes dragged on and the announced time came and passed. I knew of the Czar's passion for punctuality, and after this delay had lasted some time I began to think a genuine accident must have caused it. In this weary suspense, a quarter of an hour, half an hour, three quarters passed, and my watch shewed 3.30, and still not a sign of even the pilot engine was visible.

Then a tiny black speck in the far straight distance, topped by a small white steam cloud told me the pilot engine was coming at last; and in the swift glances spared from my scrutiny of the rails, I saw it grow larger and blacker as it covered the intervening space, until it thundered up, and crashed and lumbered by us and began to fade in the opposite direction disappearing round the

slight curve which was between us and Vsatesk station.

What the interval would be between the pilot engine and the first train, and what that first train would be, I did not know. The intervals, always differed; sometimes five minutes, sometimes ten, sometimes as much as twenty minutes were allowed to elapse. But the interval was nothing compared with the question—which train would follow. On that might turn the whole result of the affair.

All the men had now straightened up, and even the five on my right shewed signs of being interested. I saw them looking up with stealthy, longing, deadly fixedness for the coming of their prey.

But on the line itself there was no sign of change.

I had understood that at some point the rails would be shifted so as to throw the train off the line. But search as closely as I would, I could not detect the least sign of any preparation for this. The uncertainty which this circumstance caused added to my excitement and the suspense became doubly trying. It quickened up to a climax when I saw once again in the distance the growing black speck with the white crown, that told me the second train was at hand.

I kept my eyes glued to the rails and my ears strained to catch the first notification either by sight or sound that the trap had been laid. Without such a sign, I dared not do anything.

Yet nothing happened; and the black speck in the distance developed into a distinct shape, and increased quickly in size, and a slight hum came vibrating along the rails. The hum grew into the sound of muffled drums; then swelled to a heavy threatening rumble; and rapidly climaxed to a crashing, rattling, reverberating roar, as the clatter-

ing clanging jolting baggage train lurched heavily by, and roared away southward.

It passed safely every point on the line; and the old question which would be next recurred with greater strain than before, and drummed itself in on my brain like a sharp throbbing shoot of pain.

When for the third time the little warning speck in the distance told me that either the Czar or his suite must now be coming, my excitement waxed well nigh out of control; my hand stole on to the hilt of my sword and loosened it in the scabbard, my fingers played on the stock of my revolver, and my eyes never for an instant left the rails, but ran up and down them with swift eager searching glances, hungry for a sign.

As the distance between me and the on-coming train lessened, the tension increased and my sense of baffled impotence, when I detected no sign anywhere on the rails, was staggering. By a great effort only could I prevent myself from doing something to stop the approach of the train and my eagerness was multiplied infinitely when, in a glance which I could not keep from straying to the murderous gang on my right, I saw them one and all making ready stealthily for their deadly work.

But no sign on the track gave me my cue for action, and I could only wait, full of my resolve to do all that had to be done should this be the train to be thrown off the line.

It came thundering up and passed me without my being able to take a step of any sort. Like the other it passed along the whole section of the line in safety, though I saw, with an astonishment that for the moment bewildered me, that the Imperial saloon was the central carriage.

Obviously the Czar had passed in safety. And

I jumped instantly to the conclusion that for some reason the mechanism, which was to have derailed the train, had failed to act.

But an incident which occurred almost as soon as the train had passed, shewed me the falseness of this conclusion.

I was still staring fixedly at the track, when at a point that was exactly opposite me, and thus in a direct line with the three alder trees, I saw the two rails swing aside from the track, just enough to turn a train off the rails that was travelling over the place. There was scarcely a click of sound: and, after a moment they swung back as silently into position.

I read the whole thing in a moment.

The operator knew that the moment had come for action and wished to make quite sure that the mechanism was in due order. The sight increased infinitely the oppressive weight and strain of the suspense. I knew now that the Czar was in the third train, and that the Imperial carriage had been sent on with the second as a ruse.

I knew too, that the supreme hour of my struggle was at hand, in all grim reality.

I could now relieve my eyes from the straining task of watching the track, and I looked about me. The five men to my right were also on the alert. They had not been misled by the ruse of the empty court carriage, and were waiting in deadly readiness to strike the blow which they had come out to deal.

Then I turned my eyes northward along the straight level track, and just as I did so I caught in the distance the first glimpse of the third train, in which I knew, as certainly as if I could already see him, that the Czar was travelling.

As the train loomed nearer and the moment for action approached, my spirits rose also. Uncertainty was at an end. A few minutes would decide whether I was to live or die.

I braced myself for the biggest effort of my life.

I was like a man whose nostrils expand as they breathe in the scent of deadly fight.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ATTACK ON THE CZAR.

THOUGH I did not now care whether the rails were disturbed again or not, seeing that I knew where the mechanism was and could point to my having discovered, as the reason for what I was about to do, I kept glancing at the spot, while I let the train approach unchecked near enough to have all eyes drawn to my actions.

I guessed the distance which the brakes would take to act and when the train had reached a point such as I judged necessary, I sprang on the track between the rails and waving my arms excitedly, thundered out at the top of my voice a warning to stop the train.

This was taken up by the soldiers who repeated the shouts and cries, and a moment later the shrieking whistle of the engine told us the warning had been heeded and that the brakes were on at full pressure.

With a succession of whirring, grating, rasping, grinding jerks the train slackened quickly, and in a moment everything was plunged in indescribable commotion. The soldiers on both sides began to close in on the fast stopping train.

"Close ranks round the whole train," I shouted

to Sergeant Grostef: and ordered him away to bring up the men as quickly as possible.

But I had made one miscalculation that was nearly proving fatal to everything. When I sprang on the line to stop the train, the rails had not been moved, and even now for some reason they remained in position. I had calculated to cause the train to be stopped so that it would reach the false points at a slow pace, and thus be derailed close to where I stood. I judged that the jerk with which the train would leave the line would be sufficient to bring it to a standstill, but not enough to overturn it; and I should thus be able to get at once to the presence of the Emperor, and tell my story in person at the moment when he would be most affected by the occurrence. But as the rails remained in position—owing probably to the fact that the man operating them had seen that the train had been stopped and deemed it best to do nothing—there was nothing to stay the train's progress, except the brakes.

To my horror I saw it pass me with just about sufficient speed to carry it right into the middle of the five men who were waiting there to murder the Emperor.

With a loud shout to the men nearest to me to follow I dashed after it, making sure as I ran in which carriage was the Emperor.

The first of the five men planted himself right in my path, and fired his revolver point-blank at me when I was only three or four paces from him. He missed and then drew his sword to engage me. With scarcely a second's delay I cut down his sword arm and a second slash at his neck as I ran past, sent him reeling down the embankment, all but headless, with the blood spurting from the fearful wounds I had inflicted.

I tore it from him.

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My one thought was now the Emperor; and I saw that the other assassins had discovered him in the train as quickly as I.

One of them stood with a bomb, ready poised in his hand, intending to hurl it right into the carriage. I tore it from him and threw it with all my force over the embankment and then plunged my sword into the villain's heart.

The bomb exploded the instant it touched the ground below, and the effects were perfectly awesome. There was a prodigious roar; the earth reeled as if under a heavy blow, and a number of the soldiers were thrown to the ground; the train seemed to be shaken bodily: and before the reverberation of the explosion ceased, the splintering of wood and the crashing of glass, told of desperate injuries to some of the carriages.

The saloon carriage in which the Czar travelled suffered most, and it was so violently shaken that the windows were broken, the sides split, and the doors jammed.

It was a moment for strong heads; and, thank God, I was able to keep mine.

The three surviving Nihilists were among the first to shake off the effects of the shock, and two of them made instantly for the door of the Czar's carriage.

His Majesty had been at the window and must have seen me tear the bomb from the man's hand; but the shock had driven him away now. Glancing round I saw Sergeant Grostef and one or two more of my men had recovered themselves and were running towards us. Seconds meant lives now; and I dashed forward and sprang upon the steps of the carriage after the two who were striving with might and main to tear the door of the saloon open. It

was partly jammed by the effects of the explosion, and was being defended by two men, who to my surprise were His Majesty's only companions in the saloon. I learnt the reason for this afterwards; another instance of the damnable treachery which hedged the Emperor round.

Those inside were like children before the maddened Nihilists; and the door was wrenched open and the Czar's companions shot down but not killed, just as I reached the carriage platform. I shot one of the Nihilists instantly, but I believe the other would have succeeded in his deadly purpose had it not been for Sergeant Grostef who entered the carriage on my heels. He dashed forward and threw himself on the second man and both went to the ground in a fearful struggle.

The Emperor, though as brave as a man could be, was for a moment in complete bewilderment. Caught weaponless and menaced by what seemed certain death, his nerves all unhinged by the explosion, his companions struck down before his face, he had rushed away in an effort to escape from what looked like a hellish snare, and was seeking to fly by the other door, when the fifth of the murderous crew attacked him with drawn sword. Seeing the man in uniform, the Czar believed that the whole of the guard had mutinied and meant to murder him.

"Is there no one to help me?" he cried, looking round.

"Yes, to hell," growled the man, with a grim quip, as he rushed upon him.

I had dropped my sword in entering the saloon, and my revolver had been dashed out of my hands, so that I could do nothing but fling myself before the Emperor, and give my body to save his.

I dashed in between them, uttering a loud and violent shout, in the hope of attracting the man's attention to me. But he was too grim a devil to be turned from his work; and the only effect of my interference was to impel him to greater efforts.

But he was too late.

Taking a liberty with his Imperial Majesty, which at another time might have cost me my freedom and perhaps my life, I pushed the Emperor violently on one side, and threw myself upon his murderer.

The thrust that was meant for the Emperor, passed through my neck, and I rejoiced as I felt the man's steel run into my flesh. I had saved the Emperor's life, even if I had lost my own. Then I called to Grostef as I felt the villain draw out the steel and saw the light of unsated murder lust redden his eyes.

With a desperate effort I seized his blade, and though it cut and gashed my hands through and through as the man tugged and twisted it to wrest it from me, I held on till the villain put his foot against my chest and dragged the weapon away, despite my most desperate effort. Then he drew it back to plunge it into the Czar's heart. But at that moment I saw Grostef's great blade swing in the air with tremendous force, and sever the miscreant's head from his body.

But the Czar was safe: and as I rolled over near his feet, I rallied all my strength for a last effort and cried:——

"God save your Majesty."

After that I had a dim feeling that good old Grostef and the Emperor were both bending over me trying to staunch the blood that came flowing from my throat and mouth, choking me, from the

wound which the villain had meant for the Emperor. But I had saved him and he had seen I had saved him.

"Who is it?" I heard the Czar ask.

"Lieutenant Petrovitch, your Majesty, of the Moscow Infantry Regiment," answered the old soldier.

"Your Majesty, I implore you, take care. You are in an ambush of Nihilist villains," cried some one stepping forward hastily. "I know that man"—pointing to me—"he is the most dare-devil rebel of them all, and has planned this business for your assassination. For God's sake have a care. This is the most devilish snare that was ever vainly laid."

The Emperor moved away from me quickly and looked in the deepest perplexity from one to another of the group who had now crowded into the carriage.

"That is a strange thing to hear," said His Majesty. "The man has just saved my life at the infinite hazard of his own. You see him. But for him and for this good fellow"—waving a hand toward old Grostef—"the thrust you see there would have been in my heart."

"Yet I pledge myself to prove what I say. You know I do not speak at random. They are probably together in this."

Old Grostef growled out a stiff oath that was lost in his beard and then without releasing my head which was supported on his knee, he brought his hand to the salute and said gruffly:——

"Nihilist or no Nihilist, your Majesty, the lieutenant will soon be a dead man, choked by his own blood if his wounds are not dressed."

"There will be one traitor the less, then," said the man who had accused me, accompanying the words with a brutal sneer.

"Oh the contrary, Grand Duke," said the Emperor angrily, "his life is my special care. If he be a traitor it seems to me I should pray to God to grant me thousands of such traitors in my army."

"God save your Majesty, and Amen to that," cried old Grostef, unable to keep his tongue between his teeth at that, and positively trembling in his excitement.

"Silence," said the Emperor. "And now let all haste be made to get on to the city."

"As your Majesty pleases," said the man whom I guessed was the Grand Duke against whom Prince Bilbassoff had warned me. "I will make good my words, and we will save the life to take it."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TRUTH OUT AT LAST.

WHILE an examination of the train was made to see how much of it could proceed, my wounds were roughly dressed, and as soon as it was ascertained that only one of the saloons could go on, the Emperor said that I should travel in it with himself and his immediate party, and instructions were wired to Moscow that a doctor should be sent out to the small station just outside the city, where it had been arranged already that the Emperor should change into the Imperial train that had passed empty. The object of this was that the entry into the city should be made from the royal train, and thus no comment be raised.

As I was being moved into the other carriage an incident happened which I knew might have a very sinister effect upon my fortunes. My men cheered lustily as soon as they caught sight of me; but when the cheers had died away a wild and vehement curse greeted me from the only one of the five Nihilists who had life enough left in him to grind his teeth and hiss out an imprecation.

"He was our leader, damn him," cried the man, "and betrayed us. To hell with such a traitor!" and he poured out his curses with tremendous

volubility, till a soldier standing by, clapped his hand on his mouth and silenced him.

"Your Majesty hears that?" said the Grand Duke, and I saw the Emperor was greatly impressed and looked at me doubtingly.

I could not speak then, but I had sense enough left to understand my peril; and during the short journey I was thinking busily.

All the time the Emperor was in close consultation with the Grand Duke, and it was easy to see that poison was being poured into the Imperial ear to prejudice me. But I could do nothing until my wounds had been properly dressed and the power to speak freely restored. At present I could not utter a word without bringing the blood into my mouth: and I lay chafing and fretting and fevering myself, as I watched what I read to be the conviction of my treachery stealing over the face of the Czar.

I knew his character well enough to appreciate my danger fully. The one subject on which his mind was warped and morbid in its sensitiveness was the fear of assassination: and under its influence he would believe almost anything that was told to him. The personal influence of the Grand Duke was, moreover, enormous.

As we were nearing the little station where the change of trains was to be made, the Emperor crossed the saloon and spoke to me.

"Lieutenant Petrovitch, can you hear me?"

I looked at him and tried to raise my bandaged, mangled hand to the salute, but could not.

"Don't move," he said, hastily, seeing the attempt. "The charges made against you are of the most terrible kind and there certainly seems to be much more ground than I at first thought. But my own eyes saw what you did, and you will have the

fullest opportunity of explaining everything. For the time you are under arrest, necessarily; but it will be my personal charge to see that everything is done for you that surgical skill can do. A few hours and proper treatment will, I hope, render you able to give the necessary explanation, and in the mean time you will see no one but the doctors. I myself shall then see and question you."

He was turning to leave me then, when I made a sign that I wished to answer, and he bent forward to listen.

"Your Majesty will have a care," cried the Grand Duke, who had heard and watched everything closely.

"Do you think the man breathes poison that I should be afraid of him, maimed and bleeding and helpless as he is?" was the reply.

I made a great effort to speak, but it nearly killed me, and with all my struggle I could get only a word at a time, and that with tremendous difficulty.

"Your—Majesty—keep—my—men—watching—line—where—I—stood—by—alder—trees."

"It shall be done," he said; and I saw him exchange looks with the Grand Duke and then shrug his shoulders and lift his eyebrows as he left the saloon.

Directly he had left, the doctors came round me, and I resigned myself cheerfully and completely into their hands. But the Czar had given me the tonic that had done more than all the doctor's efforts to pull me round quickly. I was to have a private audience; and it would not be my fault, if I did not win my way to freedom and Olga.

Some three or four hours after the Czar had left me I was moved on to Moscow in the saloon where I lay; and my reception there was most mingled. Some garbled accounts of the attempt on the Emperor's life had got about, and when I was

carried from the saloon and placed in a State carriage and then driven away in the midst of a large military escort, the people were at a loss to know who I was, and whether I was a Nihilist to be hooted or a hero to be cheered. They were in a noisy mood that day, and did both therefore, until the party neared the Palace and it was clear I was being taken there. This decided that I must be a hero and the hooting ceased and the cheering shouts rang out with a deafening roar.

I was glad to be done with that part of the business. I knew well that the same throats that had been stretched in shouts of acclamation were quite as ready to be strained in yelling for my death. The populace wanted an excuse for a noise; and it was all one to them, so far as personal gratification went, whether they yelled in a man's honour, or roared for his death.

The day's round of festivities was a particularly full one for the Emperor, and it was many hours before he could possibly be at liberty; but every hour added to my strength. The doctors soon ascertained that the wound in the neck was not a very dangerous one, though it had been a ghastly one enough to look upon. The thrust had been within an ace of killing me; but the man's weapon had missed the arteries and the vertebrae, though it had sliced an ugly wound in the windpipe, having let the blood into it, and thus nearly choked me. My hands were badly cut, very badly mangled indeed; and the doctors thought more seriously of them than of the wound in the neck, so far as after-consequences were concerned. But they soon patched me up sufficiently to enable me to speak if necessary.

With this knowledge I awaited the Emperor's

coming with such patience as I could command.

It was past midnight before he came; and then only to ask as to my condition. He seemed pleased that I was so much better: and closely questioned the doctor who had remained in constant attendance on me as to the exact nature of my wounds and when I should be able to undertake the fatigue of a long conversation. I might do it at once with care, was the doctor's report; but it would be better after a night's rest.

"Then it shall be to-morrow evening. Certain matters have yet to be investigated," said the Czar, turning to me, "and you will have full opportunity of answering all that may be said." His manner had ceased to shew the kindliness I thought I had detected in the earlier questions about my condition, and I judged that his mind had received further prejudice against me.

I felt that delay was dangerous to me; but I could not help myself. I said I should prefer to answer all his questions at once and tell him all I had to say; but he turned from me somewhat peremptorily with a short reply that he had made his decision. And with that he left the room.

I augured ill from the Emperor's demeanour; but as any change in him would only increase my need for the greatest possible amount of strength, I thrust all my troubles resolutely out of my thoughts and went to sleep. I slept into the next day when the doctor's report was altogether favourable. My head, too, was clear and my wits vigorous for the ordeal that was in store for me.

In the morning, the Emperor sent to inquire my condition, instead of coming in person, and I interpreted this as a sign that the thermometer of favour was still going down.

When he came in the evening the Grand Duke was with him, and I saw by the expression of the latter's face that he at any rate was anticipating a triumph and my downfall.

"Now, Lieutenant, you are well enough to answer questions, tell the truth. I warn you it must be the whole truth; for I have had many surprising facts brought to my knowledge, and all your answers can be at once tested—and will be."

"Your Majesty, I pledge myself to answer every question. But before I do that there is one communication I should like to make to yourself alone."

"You can make any statement you like afterwards. Now, tell me, are you a Nihilist?"

"I am not," I answered firmly.

"Well, what have been—Stay, you acted bravely yesterday, you are charged with this: that you are and have been a Nihilist for years and that your sister is one also; that you were concerned twelve months ago in the attack upon the Governor of Moscow; that before and since then you have been in constant communication with the Nihilist leaders; that with your own hand you assassinated Christian Tueski, after having yourself volunteered for the work; that you proposed the plot which by the mercy of God failed yesterday; that you were privy to the whole matter and went out to assist in the deadly work."

"Who are my accusers, Sire?"

"It is the accusation, not the accuser you have to answer," replied the Emperor, sternly. "You are to answer, not question."

"I have a complete answer, which happily I can support with ample proof. Until less than two months ago, I had never exchanged a word with a Nihilist...."

"He is a liar," burst out the Grand Duke, vehemently.

A hot answer rose to my lips, but I checked it.

"Then, Sire, a band of them set upon me in the street and would have assassinated me, had I not beaten them off with my sword. One of them I took prisoner to my rooms, and from him I learnt that I was supposed to have...."

"Supposed!" exclaimed the Grand Duke.

"Supposed to have incurred their wrath. They had sentenced me to death, it appeared, and that was the first attempt at my execution. I then took a course which I am well aware will seem peculiar. I went to a meeting at which the death of Christian Tueski was resolved, and I was selected to kill him."

"You confess this?" cried the Emperor, harshly. "You, my officer?"

"Sire, I beg your patience. I did this because I did not think I should be in Russia many hours; and because I thought I could gain the time I needed by pretending to be at the head of the conspiracy. Not for a moment did I intend to lay a finger on him. I am no assassin."

"But he was assassinated by you Nihilists," cried the Emperor, with bitter indignation. "The whole land has rung with the news."

"The man is a madman, or takes us for fools," said the Grand Duke.

"I am as innocent of his death, Sire, as a child, except, I fear, indirectly. He died by the hand of his wife, whom on the very day of his death I had warned of the plot to kill him."

"Your proofs, man, your proofs," cried the Emperor impatiently.

"That most unfortunate woman had been under the impression that there had been an intrigue between myself and her and...."

"Half Moscow knew of it," interrupted the Duke.

"Until less than two months ago, I had never seen her in all my life," I returned. "She thought by this deed to coil such a web round me that I could not escape from marrying her. Had I wished to kill the man, I had ample opportunity on the very afternoon of the day he was murdered, for I was closeted alone with him for two hours. He, too, had set his bullies on to me and I went to settle things with him and to get permits to leave the country for myself and Olga Petrovitch. I got them, and that night his wife thrust into his heart a dagger she believed was mine, added the Nihilist motto, and then hid the sheath, with the name 'Alexis Petrovitch' on it, intending to use it as a means to force me to marry her under the threat of charging me with the crime."

"Your repute does not belie you," growled the Duke. "You're the most callous dare-devil I ever heard of to tell a tale of that kind. To choose a woman's petticoats!"

The Emperor turned to him and held up a hand in protest.

"In that way I got the credit for that crime; and I was then approached about the attempt of yesterday."

"Ah!" The Emperor drew in a sharp breath.

"I listened to what was said, believing still that I should be out of the country before the time, and intending in any event to make the success of the scheme impossible. A series of extraordinary events prevented my leaving, and when more details were told me, I saw there must be someone in the matter very near your Majesty's throne. I thought I could perhaps discover who that was and thus, by remaining, serve your Majesty most effectively. I

think I know now who it is, or at least have the means of obtaining proof. Up to nine o'clock yesterday morning the pivot on which everything was to turn was yet unsettled. A part was assigned to me days ago, on the understanding that certain military duties would be confided to me; that a change in the whole plans would be made at the very last moment; that all the commands would be altered; and that I should find myself in charge of a certain section of the line. I was told this in general terms more than a week ago; and everything was confirmed to me in detail on Sunday morning—twenty-four hours before the change was announced by the Colonel of the regiment."

"'Fore God, Sir, what are you saying?" cried the Emperor in a loud voice. He had turned white and was pressing his hand to his forehead with every sign of great agitation. "Do you hear this?" he asked the man who had been so loud in accusing me, and who himself was now fighting hard for self-possession.

I had struck home indeed.

A dead silence followed, lasting more than a minute; and to give it full weight I affected to be unable to speak.

"I'm not surprised such a tale overcomes him in the telling. It is wild enough to listen to, let alone to invent," said the Grand Duke, recovering himself with a sneer.

"Proceed, when you can, Lieutenant," said the Emperor, shortly.

"I have nearly finished, Sire," I answered weakly. "But there is one point where I can give you the highest corroboration of the key to all this seeming mystery. Will your Majesty send for Prince Bilbassoff?"

The Duke started as I mentioned the name and glanced keenly at me as it seemed to me in much discomposure.

"I was told, Sire," I resumed, when the Emperor had complied with my request. "That there was one, or at most two persons beside your Majesty who knew the real order of matters for yesterday; and that it was from that one, or from one of those two persons, that the information was given to the Nihilists which formed the basis of this plot. I did not believe it possible, Sire, and I did not think therefore that any attempt could be made. But yesterday morning to my intense astonishment, I found myself appointed to command exactly the section of the line of which I had been told by the Nihilists, many hours, indeed days in advance."

The consternation of both my hearers as I dwelt on this was so great that I emphasized it; and I saw then that I could safely slur over the only point that I really feared in the whole story—the episode of the five men whom I had posted in accordance with the Nihilist orders.

I had struck such a blow at the Grand Duke that he said no more; and he was much more busy thinking of how to defend himself than of how to accuse me.

I next told of the secret mechanism; how I had seen it work; how it proved that the operator must have had exact knowledge of the train in which the Emperor would travel, and then how I had sprung on the line to stop the train. I left my actions after that to speak for themselves.

The impression created by my story was profound; due of course to the terrible and daring accusation I had levelled at the man who had accused me.

The Emperor remained wrapped in deep thought;

and in the silence that followed, Prince Bilbassoff entered. I could tell by the quick glance he gave round the room and particularly at me, that he did not at all like the look of matters. He had heard something of the facts about me, and I believe he thought I had perhaps denounced him in the matter of the proposed duel with the Grand Duke.

"Lieutenant Petrovitch has asked for you to be present, Prince, to support some part of the explanation he has given of certain charges brought against him."

"As your Majesty pleases," replied the Prince bowing.

The Emperor resumed his attitude of intense thought, and then after some moments, he regarded me with a heavy frown and said very sternly and harshly:

"The story you tell is incredible, sir. It is a mass of contradictions. You say the Nihilists attempted to kill you, having decreed your death; and yet that you had never spoken to one until the night of the attempt. You say this woman whom you accuse of the murder of her husband did this horrible deed for your sake as the result of an intrigue —and yet that you had never seen her until almost the very hour when she sinned thus for your sake. You say that you listened to these Nihilist intrigues in the belief that you would be out of the country —yet you hold and have held for years a commission in my army. It is monstrous, incredible, impossible."

"There is another contradiction which your Majesty has forgotten," said I daringly. "That I, being as my enemies tell your Majesty, a Nihilist of the Nihilists and a leader among them, should yet have slain three of them with my own hand in

defence of your Majesty's life and have turned the sword of the fourth into my own body. As your Majesty said yesterday, traitors of that kind should rather be welcome. But if your Majesty thinks that that is an additional proof of my guilt, my life is at your service still."

He looked at me as if in doubt whether to rebuke me for this daring presumption, or to admit his own doubt. But I did not give him time to speak.

"I have deceived your Majesty, however, though I wished to speak openly at the outset. I told you there was a key to all this of a most extraordinary fashion. There is; and I throw myself humbly on your mercy, Sire. The tales you have been told about me are all true to a point, and false afterwards. To a point all these horrible charges against Alexis Petrovitch are true; but what I have told you is true also. The key is—that I have only been Alexis Petrovitch for seven weeks. I am not a Russian, Sire, but an Englishman; and Prince Bilbassoff here has within the last few hours had proof of this."

"An Englishman!" exclaimed the Czar, in a tone that revealed his complete bewilderment. "I don't understand."

"I wish to tell your Majesty everything," and then I told him almost everything as I have set it down here.

As I told the story, ending with my wish to be allowed to leave the country at once, I saw his interest deepening and quickening, and perceived that he was coming round to my side. He listened with scarcely a break or interruption, and at the close remained thinking most earnestly.

"What confirmation have you, Prince?"

Prince Bilbassoff was so relieved to find that I

had said nothing indiscreet about him that he spoke in the strongest way for me.

"I know much of this to be true, your Majesty. I have had telegrams from England confirming Mr Tregethner's story; and there is now in Moscow a certain Hon. Rupert Balestier, who has been making the most energetic inquiries for him; and—the weirdest of all—the wretched woman, Paula Tueski, has killed herself and left a confession of her crime."

The Emperor's decision was taken at once.

"I owe you deep reparation, Mr. Tregethner. I ought to have trusted my instinct and my eyesight, and have known that no man would have done what you did yesterday to save my life, and be anything but my firm friend. May God never send Russia or me a greater enemy than you. May you never lack as firm a friend as I will be to you. God bless you!"

My heart was too full for speech, and I could only falter out the words:

"I would die for your Majesty."

"You will do better than that—you will live for me; and when you are well, we will speak of your future."

With that he turned to leave the room and said to the Grand Duke, who was quite broken and unstrung:—

"Now, we will find that strange leakage."

As soon as they had left, Prince Bilbassoff questioned me closely, and when he heard about the accusation I had by inference brought against the man who had tried to ruin me and had so nearly succeeded, words could not express his delight.

CHAPTER XXX.

AFTERWARDS.

It was nearly a month before the doctors would consent to my being moved, and even then they grudged their permission. All the time I lay like a Royal Prince in the Palace with all the world ready to do my lightest wish. Had I been in a hospital, I believe the doctors would have sent me packing a full fortnight earlier; but wounds heal slowly when the State has to pay the doctors' fees.

The time was pleasant enough, however, save for one thing. I was full of anxiety on Olga's account. Prince Bilbassoff brought my friend Balestier to me and he stayed all the time, and used all his efforts to find some trace of her whereabouts. The Emperor, too, promised that all in his power should be done to find her; and whenever I saw Prince Bilbassoff I importuned him also on the same quest; and his promises were as ripe as the Czar's.

She was not found, however, and I fretted and worried until Balestier drove home the conviction that the best thing I could do was to hurry and get well, and then set out to search for her myself. This pacified me, and I did all that was possible to help the doctors.

But this failure to find her was a never-ending

subject of thought, as well as of somewhat angry satire when the opportunity offered. One day when the Prince came I rallied him strongly on the matter, thinking to gibe him into greater activity.

"Your agents are poor hounds, Prince," I said. "They bay loudly enough on the trail, but they don't find."

"They have found the brother," he answered quietly. "And the girl can't be far off."

"The brother be hanged," cried I.

"Not by the Russian hangman. He doesn't mean to return here; but he has dropped your name and probably by this time has left Paris altogether. He knows the facts—or some of them; our agent told him them; and he means to put as great a distance between himself and Russia as the limitations of the globe will permit."

"He's a poor creature. How was he found?"

"As usual—a woman."

"Well, I owe him no grudge. He has given me a better part than I ever thought to play in life. And a good wife too—if we can only find her."

"We shall find her. The woman's not born that can hide herself from us, when we are in earnest."

"Well, I wish you'd be thoroughly in earnest now. If you were only as much in earnest as you were about that duel...."

"I am; for I owe you more than if you had fought the duel." I looked at him in some astonishment. "I have only to-day heard the definite decision," he continued. "You gave me the clue, and I did not fail to follow it up. You say my men are not sleuth hounds. Give them a blood scent like that and try."

"All of which is unintelligible to me," I replied, noting with surprise his excitement and exultation.

"Heavens, lad, I'm more sorry than ever you're not going to join us. And now that that hindrance is out of the path, the path is brighter than ever. What fools you young fellows are to go tumbling into what you call love, and playing the devil with a career for the sake of muslin and silks and pretty cheeks. I suppose..." he looked questioningly, and waited as if for me to speak.

"Suppose what?" I knew what he meant well enough, but liked to make him speak out.

"That you've really made up your mind or whatever you call it, not to stop in Russia?"

"Absolutely. I'm going to commit social suicide and marry for love—that is, if I can only find my sweetheart; or rather if you can find her for me."

"I wish I couldn't," he returned; and then fearing I should misunderstand him, added:—"I don't mean that. I mean, I'm sorry I'm not to have your help."

"At one time it looked as though you were going to have it whether I would or no, and I'm afraid I may have misled you and—and others somewhat. I'm sorry for this."

"Save your vanity, youngster," he said with a short laugh, understanding me. "My sister is no love-sick maiden with her head full of a silly fancy that any one man is necessary to her."

I flushed a little at the rebuke; and bit my lip.

"We wanted you for Russia, not for ourselves," he added, after a pause. "You have already done the Empire a splendid service; and that's why you're regretted. Though, mark me, I don't say, now that things have turned out as they have, I should not have been a bit proud of you as a member of my family."

"What service do you mean? Saving my own skin?"

"No. Overthrowing the Grand Duke. He is completely broken. No trap could have snared him half so well. It has now come out that the disposition of the troops was his sole work; he himself arranged the very order of the trains; and the minute details which he executed were known to him alone. He laid his plans splendidly for his infernal purpose, and had you been the man he anticipated—the dare-devil who had killed Tueski—nothing could have saved the Emperor's life. But God in His mercy willed the overthrow of as clever a villain as was ever shielded by high rank. That particular slip no man could have possibly foreseen; but he made another which surprised me. Only a little thing, but enough. When I came to look closely into the business I found that he had worked out in the greatest detail all the arrangements for the last journey and the disposition of the troops, and had committed them to paper in a number of sealed orders. These he dated back to the previous Saturday; but only gave them out the last thing on Sunday night. His object was of course that when inquiries came to be made the dates on the papers should tell their own story and prove, apparently, that, as they had been given out on the Saturday, there would have been plenty of time for it to have leaked out to the Nihilists through some one of the many officials who would be in possession of it, at the time you proved it was known to the Nihilists. On that supposition there were a hundred channels through which it would have got out, and the Duke would have been only one among many in a position to divulge the secret. Like a fool he thus drew the coil close round

his own body; and as soon as the Emperor knew that, my men made a search. That did the rest effectually."

"And what has happened to him?"

"What should happen to such a man?" answered the Prince, sternly.

"Death."

"Right. But the Emperor would not. He's as soft as a pudding. The man is imprisoned, that's all. For life, of course. But rats have an ugly trick of slipping out as well as into a dungeon. And if he ever does get out, boy, you will have one enemy powerful enough to make even you cautious."

"Keep him safe, then," I laughed. "For when I leave Russia, I want to leave all this behind me."

"You may look for trouble of some kind from the Nihilists, however."

"They are not taken very seriously by us English, Prince," I replied.

"Maybe; but remember you have been a Russian for a couple of months, and have dealt them a stroke that they will never forget."

He left me soon after that, but I did not pay any serious heed to his warning. I pondered his news, however. I was glad that Alexis Petrovitch had ceased to masquerade in my name; but I could not understand how it was that if the Russian agents could so easily find the brother, they should be baffled in their search for Olga. But it spurred my anxiety to go a-hunting on my own account; and I was heartily glad therefore, when the doctors agreed to release me, and my marching orders for St. Petersburg came.

By the Emperor's commands I was taken straight to his Palace; and his Majesty's reception could not have been more gracious than it was.

He loaded me with signs of his favour; with his own hands pinned to my breast the highest Order he could confer on a foreigner; and did everything except press me to enter his service.

"Your sojourn in Russia is associated in my mind with so painful and terrible an event, and you are personally connected with it so closely, that in my service you would always serve to keep open a wound that bleeds at the mere reference. I am like a man who has given unrestrainedly the kisses of love and received in return the poison of the asp. Moreover, Prince Bilbassoff tells me that you have made up your mind to go to your own country; and while you will, I hope, always be my friend, and I, with God's help, will always be yours, I shall not seek to detain you."

"I am even now impatient to be away, your Majesty," I replied, "and crave your leave to go at once. I hope to leave St Petersburg immediately." I spoke with the eagerness of a lover; and his reply surprised, and indeed, dismayed me.

"No, Mr. Tregethner, that I cannot suffer. I should feel an ingrate if I permitted you to leave without accepting my hospitality. I do not like an unwilling guest; but for a fortnight more at least you must remain here."

I looked at him quickly in my amazement, and then with a bow said:—

"Your Majesty has promised me the gracious distinction of your friendship; and as a friend I appeal to you to permit me to be your guest at another time. The matter I have in hand is very urgent."

"I am not accustomed to have my wishes in these matters questioned," returned the Emperor; and at that moment I wished the Imperial friendship at the bottom of the Baltic.

It meant that just when I was well and strong, and in every way able to start on the task that was more to me than anything else on earth, I had to cool my heels dangling attendance on this well meaning Imperial Marplot in this prison-palace of his. But I smothered my feelings like a courtier and murmured an assent—that compliance with his wishes would be a pleasure.

He laughed, and then in a most un-Emperor-like manner clapped me on the shoulder and said:—

"You'd soon learn the humbug of the courtier, friend. But you must not put all this down to me. You stay by the special desire of the Prince Bilbassoff's beautiful but rather imperious sister, in whose favour you stand high—though you have not always treated her very well, it seems. She has now a great desire for some more of your company, and has set her heart on your remaining to be present at a Court marriage which she has planned."

"I shall know how to thank the Princess when I see her," I answered, drily enough to make my meaning clear; for the Emperor laughed and said that might be true and that the Princess was even now anxious to see me to thank me for past services.

My gratitude to the latter may be imagined; and when the Emperor dismissed me, I thought of the pleasure it would afford me to express it to her.

The opportunity came at once, for I was shewn straight to a saloon where she appeared to have been awaiting me.

"We meet, under changed circumstances, Mr. Tregethner—my inclination to call you Lieutenant is almost irresistible."

"His Majesty has told me, Princess, that it is to you I owe the pleasure of being compelled to stay here at the present time."

"I am glad to have been able to secure you so high a mark of the Imperial favour," she answered, her eyes laughing at me, but the rest of her features serious. "I am always glad to help those who are candid and frank with me."

"As glad as you are to be candid and frank with those you help, Princess? Is there another duel in prospect? Or more wrongs to be avenged? In connection with this marriage I hear of, for instance?"

"A fair question," she answered, smiling. She was certainly a very beautiful woman when she smiled. "There is—but only very indirectly. By the way, do you not wonder that I content myself with giving you no more than a fortnight's imprisonment?"

"If you knew the punishment it is likely to be to me you would not wish to inflict a heavier."

"You mean, you are so eager to be searching for this girl who masqueraded as your sister, that you cannot spare a fortnight for the Russian Court. Excuse me; I cannot think that even Englishmen can be so impolite and phlegmatic."

"My 'sister' is very dear to me, Princess," I said, emphasizing the word.

"Oh, yes, we know the value of a lover's sighs and a lover's vows and a lover's impatience and a lover's constancy and a lover's everything else. And you Englishmen are but like other men in these things."

I didn't understand her, so I held my tongue.

"I dare believe that though you are now so eager to be away on this romantic search of yours, and are fretting and fuming at the delay which I have caused, so that you may have the opportunity of witnessing the grandeur of the Court marriage

I have arranged, you will cool in your ardour long before the fortnight is out. There are women about the Russian Court, Sir, to the full as fair and witching and sweet as Olga Petrovitch."

"I have the evidence of that before my eyes, Princess," I said, looking at her and bowing to hide my chagrin at her words.

"You are angry that I hold you fickle. You should not be," she said, with a swift glance reading my mood.

"I have confidence in my faith."

"And I confidence in your lack of it," she retorted, with a touch of irritation in her tone. "I dare wager heavily that we have here many a young girl in whose smiles the fire of your eagerness to leave Russia in this search would be quickly quenched. Nay, I will do more, for I love a challenge, and love especially to see a man who vaunts himself on his strength of purpose and strong will and fidelity overthrown and proved a braggart —but perhaps you dare not be put to a test?" She asked this in a tone that made every fibre of purpose in my body thrill with loyalty to Olga in reply to the taunt.

"Name your test," I answered, shortly.

"I wager you that I will find one among my maidens here who will turn you from your purpose of leaving us; lure you into more than content to abandon your search; and make you pour into her own pretty ears a confession that you are glad I caused you to dally here—and all this within three days."

"It is not possible, Princess. I take up your challenge readily, if only to while away the hanging time."

She looked at me as if triumphantly.

"You dare say that? Then you are half conquered already. Now I know you will——What is it?" she broke off to a servant who came in.

Then after hearing the servant's message, she made an excuse and left me.

I was more than angry with her. The jest which had for its foundation the possibility that I should change in half a week and, instead of fretting and fuming to begin my search, be reconciled to this mummery of a flirtation with some Court hack or other, annoyed and disturbed me; and I turned away and gazed out of one of the tall bayed windows into the wide courtyard below, and felt ready to consign the whole world to destruction, with the exception of that part where Olga might be and such a strip as might be necessary for me to get to her.

Against the Princess I was particularly enraged. To hold me for an empty whirligig fool to turn like a magnetised needle in any direction that any chance magnet might choose to draw me! Stop contentedly? Bosh! Give up the search? Rot! I was so angry when I heard her come back into the room, that I affected not to know that she was present. And I stared resolutely out of the window pretending to be vastly interested in the antics of a couple of big young hounds that were gambolling together. I laughed hugely, and uttered a few exclamations to myself but loud enough for the Princess to hear.

The Princess took it very coolly, however. She said nothing, and for a couple of minutes the farce went on.

I expected a tirade at my rudeness; but instead I heard the frou-frou of her dress as she crossed the room toward me.

I increased my affected gestures and muttered exclamations, and had a mind to let fly an oath, just a little one, to shock her, when she put her face so close to mine that I could feel its warmth, and she whispered right into my ear:—

"Bad acting. Too self-conscious, Alexis!"

The Princess had won easily. I surrendered without an effort; gave up all thought of the search and was suddenly filled with a glad content to stop. For the voice was Olga's, and the merry laugh was hers, and the blush was hers, and the love light was hers too; and the next moment I held her in my arms close pressed to my heart.

The Princess had indeed won anyhow, and in much less than three days; and I stopped for that wedding with all the delight in the world—in fact nothing could have induced me to miss it.

For the bride was Olga, and the bridegroom myself, once—"that devil Alexis!"

THE END.

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